

# **ENGLISH AS A WEAPON OF POWER: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD**

**Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Education  
specialising in Applied Language and Literacy Studies**

**by Andrea Pamegiani**

**FACULTY OF HUMANITIES  
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**

**April 2005**

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Dr. Rochelle Kapp**

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### **Declaration**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole or in part for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed and has been cited and referenced.

Signature

Date

signature removed

Andrea Parmegiani

29 April 2005

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## ABSTRACT

This mini-dissertation explores the effects of the growth of English as an international and an intranational lingua franca with a focus on the South African debate about language and socio-economic empowerment. This exploration is carried out through an extended review of some of the theories that have challenged the notion that the spread of English is empowering for the majority of the world's population. I refer to these theories as the "critical discourse" about the power of English and argue that within this discourse there is a tendency to be exceedingly dismissive of the idea that the spread of English can in any way empower native speakers of other languages. I refer to this tendency as the "critical model" for looking at the power of English and analyze three metaphors that are often used as tropes to exclude from the "critical discourse" arguments that can be made for using English as a weapon of empowerment.

These metaphors characterize English as a "linguistic poacher" that threatens endangered language species with extinction, as a "gatekeeper" that excludes the masses from socio-economic mobility, and as a "colonizer of the mind," or a mechanism that imposes Western-centric values. I argue that while it is important to be aware of these negative effects, the critics of English should not rely too heavily on negative constructions of this language, lest they create theories that are marred by epistemological fallacies that have negative pedagogical and political consequences. Epistemologically, sealing the border of a discourse can lead to tautological arguments that rely excessively on determinism and essentialism. Pedagogically, being exceedingly critical of the power of English can create obstacles in finding ways to teach this language effectively.

Politically, underplaying the empowering potential of English can lead to a rhetoric that presents continuities with colonial and apartheid discourses. In addition to being politically problematic, this rhetoric is an impediment for the promotion of marginalized languages in South Africa.

In order to move beyond these fallacies, I suggest adopting a poststructuralist understanding of culture and identity. I show ways in which seeing culture and identity as de-centered, fluid, and contested notions can help critics create a discourse that is not overly deterministic and essentializing in its construction of the relationship between language, power, and identity. I argue that this relationship should not be seen in terms of the mother tongue / additional language dichotomy, but rather, in terms of a de-centered, fluid, and contested notion of language “ownership.” I explore this notion and discuss its importance for the debate about language and empowerment in South Africa.

## EDITORIAL NOTE

I have followed the stylistic recommendations of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA), 5<sup>th</sup> edition. APA is the most commonly used style in the social sciences in the United States. As requested by my research advisors, I have single-spaced indented quotations.

# Chapter I

## Introduction

Few people would dispute the idea that English is a powerful language, if we take the number of its speakers as an indicator of its power.

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, the number of speakers of English appears to have increased almost ten-fold since 1900. Today, rough agreement can be found on figures that put the total number of speakers of English at between 700 million and one billion. This figure can be divided into three roughly equal groups: native speakers of English, speakers of English as a second (or intranational) language, and speakers of English as a foreign (international language) language. It is this last group which is the hardest to estimate but clearly the fastest growing section of world speakers of English [sic]. (Pennycook, 1994a, p.8)

The power of English is also apparent if we consider its increasing use as the primary means of communication in sociolinguistic domains that are associated with high status, such as education, politics, science, and international business. According to the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*:

English is used as an official or semi-official language in over 60 countries and has a prominent place in a further 20. It is either dominant or well-established in all six continents. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music, and advertising. Over two thirds of the world's scientists write in English. Three quarters of the world's mail is written in English . . . Over 50 million children

study English as an additional language at the primary level; over 80 million study it at the secondary level (these figures exclude China). (Crystal, 1987, p. 358)

What is being called into question in the debate about the power of English are the effects of this growth. In other words, the question is whether the spread of this language brings socio-economic progress for the majority of the world's population, or whether it functions as a mechanism to reproduce social stratification globally and nationally.

Spending time in South Africa has made it easier for me to see that it is crucial for theorists and practitioners in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages and dialects (TESOL) to be aware that the power of English does not always translate into increased opportunities for socio-economic mobility.

South Africa is a multilingual country. After the transition to democracy in 1994, the number of official languages rose from two (English and Afrikaans) to eleven. English is spoken as a mother tongue only by roughly 9% of the country's population (Census 2000). While many South Africans can function in English as well as they can in their mother tongue, many more cannot. Because apartheid's education policies were aimed at keeping people separate and unequal, those who have little or no command of English today are in most cases those who suffered the most from racist social engineering:

The structural inequalities of colonialism followed by apartheid had been evidenced in racism and ethnicity and class or socio-economic differences. Structural inequalities, however, existed in many other domains, including the use of language for the purpose of exclusion and protection of privilege. (Heugh, 2002, p. 11)

One of the ways in which the apartheid government succeeded in using language “for the purpose of exclusion and protection of privilege” was through the 1953 Bantu Education Act and the corpus of policies that regulated the provision of schooling for Black South Africans until the collapse of apartheid.

[Bantu Education] was devised for the sole purpose of effecting the unequal segregation of [South African] society. Just as Bantu Education was an integral part of apartheid, so the language in education policy was integral to both Bantu Education and apartheid . . . Segregated education, a language policy designated for separate development, unequal resources, and a cognitively impoverished curriculum have resulted in the massive under-education of the majority of the population. (Heugh, 2000, p. 4)

South Africa’s post-apartheid constitution is one of the most progressive in the world and it grants equal status to all eleven official languages. These rights include the provision for the use of all these languages in official functions and the promotion of African languages, which had been relegated to an inferior status until the end of apartheid (PANSALB, 2001, p. 2).

The 1997 Language in Education Policy statement issued by the Ministry of Education endorses an additive multilingualism policy aimed at promoting both the development of the mother tongue and the acquisition of additional languages in South African schools. The mother tongue is used as the main medium of instruction in grades 1-4 to allow students to build solid literacy foundations in the language with which they are most familiar and in order for them to be able to use these literacy skills as tools for learning other languages (Cummins & Swain, 1986, pp. 37-40). An additional language

is introduced as a medium of instruction from grade 4, but students continue to use their mother tongue throughout primary and secondary school.

The reality is quite different, though. There is a very wide gap between policy and practice in South Africa, as far as linguistic rights are concerned. Not only have many schools that serve primarily native speakers of African languages opted for using English as a medium of instruction from grade 1, but fluency in English continues to be a precondition for most forms of employment. A high level of English command is also essential for taking part in the country's political life, as most political speeches are given in English, and even when they are reported by the news in other languages, they are not dubbed or subtitled. Mastering English is a precondition for meaningful participation in the dominant institutions of society. Part of the power of English, therefore, lies in maintaining a series of privileges for a few, while denying opportunities to many.

Yet, I do not believe that it would be epistemologically, pedagogically, and politically sound to construe English exclusively in terms of a subtle mechanism that excludes from privilege. I will argue that in order to understand the power of English, we have to see it as a double-edged sword: English can be both a weapon of empowerment and of disempowerment depending on how it is used. I will build my argument through an extended review of some of the theories that have challenged the assumption that the spread of English is synonymous with empowerment. I will also suggest a conceptual vocabulary that, by taking into account the ambivalent nature of the power of English, can help the critical discourse move beyond some of the limitations I detected in the theories I reviewed.

Intranational and international aspects of the power of English cannot be easily separated: the extensive use of English as a national lingua franca in countries that were under the influence of the British empire is due, at least in part, to the importance of this language for global trade. My study will therefore consider both arguments that have been made against the spread of English as a world language and against its dominant position as a medium of instruction and language of national communication in South Africa.

My understanding of empowerment has been greatly influenced by the national debate about social stratification in post-apartheid South Africa. In this context, empowerment refers to the need to increase opportunity for socio-economic mobility for those who were most penalized by institutionalized racism and widely practiced sexism. Empowerment, therefore, entails reducing the gap between the “haves” and “the have nots.” My exposure to Bourdieu’s social theory has made me see this gap in terms of an inequitable distribution of “material” and “symbolic capital,” which refer, respectively, to economic wealth and social prestige (Thompson, 1982, p. 14; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992 p. 98).

My notion of empowerment is based on the assumption that there are mechanisms in place that ensure that different members of society have differing levels of access to material and symbolic capital. This was obvious in the case of South Africa during apartheid, when institutionalized racism prescribed a rigid correlation between people’s skin hues and their place on the socio-economic ladder. In other cases, these mechanisms are more subtle. Gee’s (1996) notion of “master myths” points to the existence of “pervasive social theories” that “involve us in important beliefs about the distribution of social goods, beliefs that very often advantage some groups against others” (p.123).

Gee's work focuses on how literacy functions as a "master myth" by promoting what for him is the false notion that unless people are able to read or write in a certain way, they should be seen as being incapable of holding high positions in society. The theories I will examine in this mini-dissertation look at English as a possible "master myth." I shall refer to these theories as the critical discourse about the power dimension of English as a national and international lingua franca.

The term discourse can have a variety of meanings. Pennycook (1994b) mapped out the ones that are most commonly used in language studies on a spectrum that stretches from more politically neutral to more politically charged understandings of the term. In applied linguistics, discourse refers to "supersentential language use" (pp. 116-117); that is, to those speech acts that involve the use of more than one sentence. In this discipline, discourse analysis involves the study of how the combination of sentences creates larger units of meanings, such as paragraphs, essays, conversation, speeches. This approach looks at the social context that surrounds supersentential language use in terms of communicative purposes, but it stops short of examining the power relations that shape the speech act in question. In other words, it assumes that the rules governing the way sentences are combined in a given context can be reduced to a communicative, functional purpose that does not affect and is not affected by power relations.

Critical discourse analysis, instead, uses the term to examine how language creates "master myths." In Fairclough's terms, the ultimate aim of this discipline is to "correct a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance, and change of social relations of power" (in Pennycook, 1994b, p.121).



This goal calls for a definition of discourse that captures the socio-political elements that come into play in a linguistic exchange.

I found Gee's distinction between "discourse with a small d" and "Discourse with a capital D" particularly helpful in understanding how language, as a social practice, contributes to defining our place in society. For Gee, "discourse" refers to the focus of study of applied linguistics, or, in his words, "connected stretches of language that make sense, like conversations, stories, reports, arguments, essays and so forth." "Discourse" extends beyond this notion by encompassing the socio-political factors that determine whether or not "a connected stretch of language" is considered appropriate in a given setting. "Discourses" involve speech acts but also values and behavior codes; they consist of "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations" which shape who we are.

Discourses are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes . . . A Discourse is then composed of ways of talking, listening, (often, too, reading and writing) acting, interacting, believing valuing and using tools and objects in particular settings at specific times so as to display a particular social identity. Discourses create social positions. (Gee, 1996, pp. 127-128)<sup>1</sup>

The idea that "Discourses create subject positions" is crucial for understanding the intricacies of the relationship between language, power and identity. The exploration of these intricacies will be the focus of Chapter III. For now, I would like to point out that Gee equates discourses to identity kits "which come complete with costumes and

instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize” (p.127). These social roles” yield different levels of material and symbolic resources: hence, “Discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society . . . . Control over certain Discourses can lead to the acquisition of social goods (money, power, status)” (p. 132).

Not surprisingly, access to “dominant Discourses,” which are most profitable in terms of symbolic and material capital, is not equitable. According to Gee, this is because discourses can be fully appropriated only through a process of unconscious acquisition that depends on socio-economic factors, rather than through a conscious learning process that can be the result of free choice. For Gee, deliberate attempts to learn a discourse that a person has not been socialized into, can lead, at best, to “partial acquisition,” which “marginalizes.” In fact, “dominant groups in a society apply rather constantly tests of the fluency of the Discourses in which their power is symbolized; these tests become both tests of natives, or at least, fluent users of the Discourse and gates to exclude non-natives” (p. 146).

I am not sure I subscribe to Gee’s notion that discourses can be fully mastered only through unconscious acquisition, rather than through formal learning. First of all, it is hard to draw a line between the two cognitive processes. “Acquisition,” which Gee defines as “enculturation (apprenticeship) into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse” (p. 147), entails some degree of explicit instruction. Similarly, “learning” does not take place in a

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of discourse I will take as a tool of analysis will be much closer to “Discourse with a capital D” rather than “discourse with a small d.” For convenience’s sake, however, I will write it with a small d, unless it appears at the beginning of a sentence or I am quoting Gee verbatim.

social vacuum; attempts to share knowledge through formal instruction also involve “supported interaction with people who have already mastered” what is being taught. Secondly, I don’t believe that people’s position with respect to discourses can be easily categorized. For Gee, discourses produce either “insiders” (people who have had full access to a discourse through the acquisition process), “outsiders,” (people who are excluded completely from the discourse), and “colonized,” (people who occupy a marginal position because they can only claim a partial command of the discourse) (p. 155). I see the boundaries between discourses as being too blurry and fluid for them to be used as a basis for such a clear cut taxonomy of subject positions. Discourses are not tight compartments; they conflict, overlap, and change over time, place, and social setting. For example, Weedon (1987) points out that discourses about femininity vary not only “from culture to culture and language to language,” but also “within different feminist discourses and are subjected to historical change” (p. 22).

I will posit a less deterministic relationship between discourse and subjectivity. While it is important to see discourses as socially constitutive forces that play a crucial role in determining who we are, I will argue that agency also comes into play in the construction of the self. While there are certainly socio-economic factors that limit the range of “identity kits” a person can have access to throughout his or her life, I also believe that individuals are not only passive recipients of these kits, but, to varying degrees, draw on them selectively, as they make choices about their lives. This is not to say that who we are, how we are seen and the amount of social goods we can claim with our social identity can be constructed merely in terms of free choice. If that were the case, we would all adopt “ways of talking” that put us in a position of privilege and there

would no such thing as social stratification. A theory of socio-economic empowerment must start from the assumption that there are structural factors that prevent an equitable distribution of social goods. At the same time, however, a theory that envisions the possibility of progressive socio-economic change must not reduce humanity to unaware victims or beneficiaries of a system whose workings are understood only by a limited number of like-minded intellectuals. Like Pennycook (1994b), I will argue that it is important to realize that “our ability to act in the world is constrained” but that it is “nevertheless crucial here to allow for human agency rather than constructing a model in which all is constructed by socio-economic (or other) relations” (p. 126).

Another aspect of discourse that is important to highlight for my argument is the notion that discourses are “resistant to criticism and self-scrutiny” and that “the Discourse itself defines what counts as acceptable criticism” (Gee, 1996, p. 132). For Kress (1985) this is the essence of discourse:

Discourses are systematic-organized sets of statements which give expression to the meaning and values of an institution. Beyond that, they define, describe, and delimit what is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension, what to do and what not to do) with respect to the area of concern of the institution, whether marginally or centrally. A discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organizes and gives structure to the way a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about. (p. 7)

I certainly noticed a tendency to proscribe -- often implicitly -- “what is possible to say and not possible to say” in the conversations about the power dimension of English. In fact, my first encounter with the corpus left me with the feeling that debate about English as a national and international lingua franca was polarized. This

impression came primarily from the second chapter of Pennycook's *The Cultural Politics of English* (1994), where the author takes a critical look at the notion that the spread of English is synonymous with socio-economic empowerment by deconstructing the "set of possible statements" propagated by institutions that promote the interests of neoliberal centers of power.

I was impressed with Pennycook's exposition of the lengths that countries such as the United States and Great Britain have gone to in order to promote the spread of their national language across the globe, and how this spread has served their economic interests (1994a, pp. 145-179). At the same time, however, it seemed to me that while Neoliberal discourses created a "set of possible statements" about English that excluded any notion that the spread of this language might have any sort of negative effects, the critical discourse that emerged from the second chapter of *The Cultural Politics* excluded, or marginalized, statements that I believe can be made about English as a weapon of empowerment.

My impression that within the critical discourse there was a tendency to dismiss, or at least underplay, the possibility that there might be any benefits in the growth of English as a lingua franca was confirmed as I read Phillipson's *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992), and Ngugi's *Decolonizing the Mind* (1981), two works that have had a seminal impact in shaping the critical debate. I also noticed this tendency in several works that were critical of the power effects of English in post-apartheid South Africa (Ndebele, 1997; Alexander, 1993; 1992; Heugh, 2002).

In my dissertation, I will argue that the power of English is ambivalent. As the neoliberal discourse emphasizes, English provides opportunities for socio-economic

mobility (Pennycook, 1994a, pp.1-35); as the critical discourse warns, English excludes from these opportunities and produces social stratification.

There are epistemological reasons for theorizing from the starting point that as a weapon of empowerment, English is a double-edged sword. In order to challenge “master myths” that shape our understanding of reality in ways that “very often advantage some groups against others,” it is crucial to fight discourses’ reluctance to engage in constructive conversations with different “ways of talking.” Internal criticism is vital. Knowledge grows through a dialectic process through which thesis and anti-thesis constantly challenge and reshape our understanding of reality.

Throughout my mini-dissertation, therefore, I will seek to embrace this dialectic process by holding polar epistemological tendencies in tension with each other. When looking at “sets of possible statements” that construct the spread English as a disempowering phenomenon, I will juxtapose a symmetrical set of statements that can be made about English as a weapon of empowerment. When “sets of possible statements” rely too heavily on Marxist tools of analysis that emphasis structure but deny agency, I will juxtapose poststructuralist concepts that point to the importance of looking at subjectivity as a key concept for theorizing about language and social change.

The focus of my critical gaze will be the critical discourse. This is not because my sympathies lie with the neoliberal side, but because critical theorists have exposed quite effectively the dangers of presenting the spread of English exclusively in terms of a “natural, neutral, and beneficial phenomenon” (Pennycook, 1994a, p. 23). I believe that investing further intellectual energies in the deconstruction of these discourses would not do much in addition to preaching to the converts. Exposing the limitations of the critical

discourse, however, might help us come up with more effective theories of language and empowerment.

I will argue that the epistemological weaknesses in the critical discourse have dire pedagogical and political repercussions that can actually foster the disempowering effect of the spread of English. As a teacher of English as an additional language and as a theorist who believes that speech acts are not politically neutral, but are exchanged in linguistic markets that allocate symbolic and material goods (Thompson in Bourdieu, pp. 17-20), I felt the need to critique the critics and to suggest theoretical alternatives for thinking about language and empowerment.

## **Chapter II**

### **The Critical Model**

#### **1. Critical Discourse and the Critical Model**

In the previous chapter, I wrote that at the beginning of my research process, the debate about English and empowerment struck me as being polarized. As my perception of the corpus became more nuanced, however, I realized that several theorists have questioned some of the statements of the critical discourse without necessarily subscribing to the neoliberal view that the spread of English is always synonymous with socio-economic empowerment (Kachru, 1986; Widdowson, 1998; Granville et. al, 1998). Even Pennycook, whose discourse struck me as being vehemently “anti-English” in my first reading, had actually warned against the danger of degenerating into “totalizing tendencies” and “deterministic theses” if the discourse becomes too dismissive of the idea that English can empower (1994a, p. 69). As we shall see (Chapter II, 3, iii), theorists who have constructed the spread of English in terms that are very negative explicitly reject “the anti-English” label and concede, more or less reluctantly, that access to English must be given within the framework of additive bilingualism educational policies aimed at promoting the learning and acquisition of both the mother tongue and of English as an additional language [Chapter I].



The “critical” vs. “neoliberal” discourse dichotomy seemed to be less and less productive as a tool of analysis for my literature review. It became clear to me that casting theorists either into “pro-English” or “anti-English” “sets of possible statements” was a move that did not do justice to the complexity of what the critics have said about English as a weapon of empowerment. Moreover, as I mentioned in the first chapter, I have come to see the boundaries between discourses as being too blurry and fluid to believe that people can easily be placed either into or out of a particular discourse. And even if discourses were indeed tight compartments, it would be humanly impossible to come up with an exhaustive review of “the set of possible statements” that have looked at English critically. Critiquing the discourse, therefore, no longer seemed like a viable project. Instead, I started thinking about critiquing only a subset of critical statements and referring to them as the “critical model.”

Models are simplified representations of phenomena that are too complex to be explained exhaustively. Because models simplify what they represent, they are subjected to intrinsic limitations; because what is represented is too complex to be fully explained abstractly, models are indispensable for theory.

The “critical model” seeks to represent a subset “of possible statements” within the critical discourse that do not engage sufficiently with the empowering potential of English. Arguments that fall into the critical model fail to acknowledge the ambivalent nature of the power of English through the use of negative constructions that exclude or underplay the possibility that this language could be used as an instrument for progressive socio-economic change.

As a simplified representation, the critical model is subjected to limitations. My synthesis cannot even capture the full complexity of the sub-set of statements that fail to do justice to English as a weapon of empowerment. This is because these statements are too numerous and because they are part and parcel of extended arguments whose theoretical value can be fully appreciated only if they are considered in their entirety. Despite its limitations, however, the critical model can be a useful tool of analysis. The statements that fail to engage with the empowering potential of English are the statements in which the critical discourse's resistance to internal criticism is the strongest. It is precisely these statements, therefore, that need to be opened up for scrutiny in order to come up with theories that can give us a better understanding of what TESOL theorists and teachers can do to maximize the power trade-off that accompanies the spread of English.

My synthesis of the critical model is built around three central metaphors that have a lot of currency in the critical discourse as tropes for constructing the negative socio-economic effect of the spread of English. One of these metaphors presents English as a poacher that is responsible for linguistic genocide: because of its hegemonic power, English saps material and symbolic resources from other languages, which are doomed to remain confined to the lower status of vernaculars or to become extinct. A second metaphor characterizes English as a gatekeeper that ensures that societies remains highly stratified; a lack of proficiency in English is used as a mechanism to exclude from education, employment, and status. A third metaphor describes English as a "colonizer of the mind": the learning and acquisition of this language in the Periphery results in the

internalization of Western-centric values that instill a sense of inferiority in the colonial subject.

Before I illustrate how these metaphors operate in the literature I reviewed, I would like to point out that their use does not necessarily result in theories that are affected by the epistemological, pedagogical, and political weaknesses of the critical model, nor that they do not have any value for understanding the power effect of the spread of English. Critical metaphors result in the critical model only if they are used as rhetorical tools to establish boundaries between what is possible and not possible to say within the critical discourse.

I would also like to stress that the critical model is not a dichotomous notion that theorists either subscribe to or reject, but a way of looking at English that oversimplifies issues of language and empowerment by failing to engage sufficiently with the benefits that can come with the appropriation of the language of power. People are not either exponents or critics of the critical model. Even though there are theorists who resort to it more than others, a person can slip in and out of the critical model while building an extended argument. Pennycook is a very good example. As we shall see (Chapter II, 3, i), his work provides a useful critique of some epistemological, pedagogical, and political shortcomings of Phillipson's argument, which occur when Phillipson fails to do justice to English as a weapon of empowerment. However, there are times when Pennycook falls into the trap of the critical model himself by not taking sufficiently into account the ambivalent nature of the power of English.

My literature review, therefore, will not summarize a series of theorists' positions and label them as "critical model" or "non-critical model" based. Instead, it will provide

examples of how this tendency to oversimplify can weaken theories that are critical of the power of English.

In the next section, I will give examples of how the three metaphors are used to deconstruct the equation between the spread of English and socio-economic empowerment. My examples will come from arguments that have critiqued both the growth of English as an international lingua franca, but also its use as a language of intranational communication, especially in South Africa. The rest of the chapter will expose the epistemological, pedagogical and political weaknesses of the critical model.

## **2. Three Metaphors of the Critical model**

### **i. English as a Linguistic Poacher**

One of the main arguments of the critical model is that English is responsible for linguistic genocide: English is characterized as a sort of “linguistic poacher” that exterminates endangered languages across the globe by excluding them from prestigious discourses, hence, relegating them to the lower status of vernaculars -- at best -- or condemning them to extinction. The work of Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson (1995) in the area of linguistic rights has had a seminal influence in the way critical linguists have come to see the power of English as an intranational and international lingua franca. Their correlated notions of “linguicide” and “linguicism”

have become key concepts in the debate. Linguicide refers to “the extermination of language, an analogous concept to (physical) genocide”; linguisticism is:

An analogous concept to racism, classism, sexism . . . that translates into ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language. (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1995, p. 83)

Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson draw a parallel between bio-diversity and linguistic diversity to argue that in order to stop the dire consequences that linguisticism and linguicide are having globally, it is essential to promote linguistic human rights. “The perpetuation of linguistic diversity can . . . be seen as a recognition that all individuals have basic human rights, and as a necessity for the survival of the planet, in a similar way to bio-diversity” (1995, p. 84).

Pennycook refers to the linguistic effects of English as a process of “linguistic curtailment”:

In a number of instances . . . English poses a direct threat to the very existence of other languages. More generally, however, if not actually threatening linguistic genocide, it poses the less dramatic but far more widespread danger of what we might call linguistic curtailment. When English becomes the first choice as a second language, when it is the language in which so much is written and in which so much of the visual media occur, it is constantly pushing other languages out of the way, curtailing their use in both qualitative and quantitative terms. (1994a, p. 14)

According to Pennycook, this curtailing process is in turn responsible for the gatekeeping effect of English: the exclusion of other languages in discourses whose mastery is a *sine*

*qua non* for the appropriation of material and symbolic resources excludes the speakers of those languages from opportunities for socio-economic mobility:

With English taking up such an important position in many educational systems around the world, it has become one of the most powerful means of inclusion and exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions. In many countries, particularly former colonies of Britain, small English speaking elites have continued the same policies of the former colonizers, using access to English language education as a crucial distributor of social prestige and wealth. (1994a, p. 14)

## **ii. English as a Gatekeeper**

Critical linguists have written at length about the gatekeeping effect of English in countries where this language plays a significant role as a medium of intranational communication, to the detriment of indigenous languages. Tollefson, for instance, denounces the way in which English in the Philippines “is creating and maintaining social divisions that serve an economy dominated by a small [local] elite and foreign economic interests” (1986, p 186).

Many voices in the South African debate have been trying to counterbalance the growing power of English as a language of national unity by alerting the public to the way this language can function as a mechanism to maintain the country’s enormous gap between the “have” and the “have nots.” Heugh, for instance, claims that

It is clear that English does not serve the interests of the majority of the people in the country. Ordinary people in rural areas and areas far from the metropolitan centers are left without real access to information and mechanisms to protect their rights. In particular, an education system which since the late 1970s has

increasingly been based on an English-mainly paradigm, has failed nearly two-thirds of the people who begin school. English has not provided meaningful access to education; very few people who are not native speakers of English actually have a practical proficiency in English, and so the majority continue to be left in a condition of extreme disadvantage. (2002, p. 12)

Similarly, Neville Alexander writes that:

Unless you have a command of standard English or of standard Afrikaans in [South Africa] you are simply eliminated from competition for jobs that are well remunerated, you are simply eliminated from consideration for certain positions of status and power . . . . This means that 75% of the population is excluded, with individual exceptions, from competing for positions of power. (1993, p. 154)

The exclusion of marginalized languages from prestigious discourses has led to the belief that these languages are semantically inferior because they are incapable of making meaning in high status communicative contexts such as politics and education. This belief, of course, reinforces the power of language as a mechanism of exclusion. Alexander refers to this phenomenon as the “static maintenance syndrome,” and points his finger at the African elite for their role in perpetuating this vicious circle:

The African elites, who inherited the colonial kingdom from the ostensibly departing colonial overlords, for reasons of convenience and in order to maintain their grip on power, have made no more than nominal gestures towards equipping the indigenous languages of the continent with the wherewithal for use in powerful and high status contexts. The result is a vicious downward spiral where the fact that these languages are not used is the cause of their stagnation and of the belief that they cannot be used in these functions . . . . Since their role models overtly and repeatedly demonstrate their lack of belief in the capacity of the indigenous languages to fulfill all the functions of a language in all domains of modern life, the people begin to accept as ‘natural’ the supposed inferiority of their language . . . . They fall prey to what I have dubbed ‘Static Maintenance Syndrome’ [sic]. (2003, pp. 14-15)

Alexander, has repeatedly made connections between his notion of “Static Maintenance Syndrome” and Ngugi’s argument that using English as primary national languages in Africa amounts to “colonization of the mind” (Alexander, 2003, p.15; 2002, p. 120).

### **iii. English as a “Colonizer of the Mind”**

The idea that English functions as a mechanism for the spreading of Western-centric world views that instill a sense of inferiority in speakers of marginalized languages has a lot of currency in the debate, and it is often associated with Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonizing The Mind*, a manifesto in which the Kenyan novelist and critic states his reasons for repudiating English and embracing his native African language as a means for literary and intellectual expression.

Ngugi does not use the concept of discourse, but his thesis rests on an understanding of language that extends beyond a socio-politically neutral means of communication to include social and cultural elements that play a key role in the formation of subjectivity:

Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture . . . . Culture embodies those moral, ethical, and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of people’s identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation, and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next. (1981, pp. 13-15)



Ngugi posits an essential, natural, fixed core that should determine how a person sees himself or herself. After claiming that “no man or woman can choose their biological nationality” he assumes the existence of an “African reality” that should lie at the roots of the cultural identity shared by the African nation (pp. 1-2). This fixed, essential, African core is being shattered by a Western, imperialist “cultural bomb.”

The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities, and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people's languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their spring of life. (p. 3)

According to Ngugi, it is primarily through language that this cultural bomb detonates:

The choice of language and the use to which language is being put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. (p. 5)

He rejects Chinua Achebe's belief in the possibility of “a new English in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings” (in Ngugi, 1981, p. 8). Ngugi concedes that there is a universal aspect of language, which he defines in terms of the “capacity to speak, the capacity to order sounds in a manner that makes for mutual comprehension,” that is shared by all human beings. However, he argues that “a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality, but

in its particularity as the language of a specific community with specific history,” which finds expression in the “particularity of sounds, words, the word order into phrases and sentences, and the specific manner or laws, of their ordering” (p. 15). Hence, the use of a “foreign language” in an African context breaks the harmony between the individual and his “natural, social environment” resulting in “colonial alienation” (p. 17) and ultimately subjugation:

Since culture does not just reflect the world in images, but through those images conditions a child to see that world in a certain way, the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition . . . . From the point of view of alienation, that is of seeing oneself from outside oneself as if one was another self, it does not matter that the imported literature carried the great humanist tradition of the best in Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, Tolstoy, Gorky, Brecht, Sholokov, Dickens. The location of this great mirror of imagination was necessarily European and its history and culture and the rest of the universe was seen from this center. (p. 18)

From the point of view of subjugation, “the images of the world” that emerged in the “language of the colonizer” instill a sense of inferiority in the “colonial child,” whose “own native languages were associated in his impressionable mind with low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability, or downright stupidity, non-intelligibility or barbarism” (pp.17-18).

Ngugi’s thesis has a lot of currency in the debate. Phillipson’s rejection of the possibility of seeing English as a neutral tool for communication is based on assumptions that resonate with echoes of *Decolonizing the Mind*.

For children whose mother tongue is not English, English is not the language of their cultural heritage, not the language of intense personal feelings and the

community . . . . Claiming that English is neutral (a tool, an instrument) involves a disconnection between what English is (culture) from its structural basis (from what it has and does). The type of reasoning we are dealing with here . . . fits into the familiar linguist pattern of the dominant language creating an exalted image of itself, other languages being devalued, and the relationship between the two rationalized in favor of the dominant language. (1992, pp. 285-288)

Nkambide Zandile (1997) refers to the fact that blacks in South Africa “use their mother tongue but must also learn two additional languages” as an “exercise that robs children of their heritage” (p. 103). Citing Ngugi, he claims that:

The arguments against the use of English as a national language also point out that it is capable of holding captive black cultures, their values, and hence their minds . . . . Information defined by representatives of a different language group is likely to be inaccurate or to exclude or deauthorize the knowledge and experience of the other or to incorporate them [sic] on terms that suit the dominant language group. Defining one’s identity in a language other than one’s own is one of the worst nightmares (p. 106)

### **3. The Tripartite Fallacy of the Critical Model**

I will now expose some of the epistemological, pedagogical, and political weaknesses that stem from the critical model’s tendency to overlook the ambivalent nature of the power of English. I will refer to these weaknesses as the “tripartite fallacy” and for clarity’s sake, I will illustrate them under three separate sections. These sections, however, are not intended to be taken as tight compartments. It is difficult -- and theoretically unproductive -- to draw rigid boundaries between epistemology, pedagogy and politics. As post-structuralism suggests, knowledge is not a politically neutral entity,

but it defines and is defined by power relations (Foucault, 1980). Similarly, pedagogy has political implications because curricula tend to favor certain forms of knowledge over others, and because the outcome of education can reproduce and / or alter power relations (Apple, 1979, pp.6-8; Shor 1992, pp. 11-13).

In my exposition, rather than drawing rigid distinctions between epistemological, pedagogical and political weaknesses of the critical model, I will try to make connections between them by showing how epistemological flaws can have dire pedagogical and political repercussions. Characterizing the power dimension of English exclusively or primarily in terms of linguistic genocide, gatekeeping, and colonization of the mind is epistemologically problematic because the spread of English can also have opposite effects. Throughout my critique, I will juxtapose “counter-metaphors” that can be used to express the empowering potential of the spread of English, in order to problematize arguments that are made on the basis of the critical model. For example, I will argue that the idea that English is a linguistic poacher needs to be considered together with the fact that in South Africa, lexical and morpho-syntactic borrowings from English are supporting the development of national Bantu languages as media of instruction. English, therefore, should also be constructed as a fertilizer for the growth of endangered language species. Similarly, the argument that English is a gatekeeper must give sufficient consideration to the fact that this language, if taught effectively, can let through the gate. English, therefore, should also be presented as a key that can open the gate that leads to socio-economic mobility. Finally, the construction of English as a “colonizer of the mind” must be juxtaposed to the important role this language has played in raising consciousness against racist, classist, sexist, and hetero-normative oppression. English,

therefore, should also be characterized as a “liberator of the mind” that can help people fight discourses that place them in unfavorable subject positions.

Pedagogically, the negative constructions of English that result if critical metaphors are used without their respective counter-metaphors could create impediments for the appropriation of this language. It is hard to invest in the process of mastering English, if English is presented exclusively or primarily in terms of the alleged damages it inflicts on its learners.

Politically, some of the arguments that underpin these metaphors are built on essentialized notions of concepts such as “culture,” “identity,” and “mother tongue” that label students, pushing them into subject positions that might not correspond to the way students see themselves and would like to be seen by others. Also, these labeling processes present continuities with colonial education policies that sought to restrict access to English while promoting mother tongue instruction. These arguments, therefore, could actually stand in the way of the promotion of marginalized languages.

In giving examples of the epistemological, pedagogical, and political limitations of the critical model, I have focused on the works of Phillipson, Pennycook and Alexander because their theories have had a seminal impact on the way TESOL theorists and practitioners have come to see the power dimension of English.

My exposition of the epistemological fallacy will focus on Phillipson’s *Linguistic Imperialism* because of the works I have reviewed, it is the one that seems to be most reluctant to look beyond negative constructions of English while building theories about the power of this language. As we will see, Phillipson himself seems to be conscious that his conclusions might have been different, had his argument engaged with other ways of

constructing English as a language of international and intranational communication.

*Linguistic Imperialism* is a good place to begin also because Pennycook's *Cultural Politics*, at least to some extent, grows out of Phillipson's thesis.

Because part of Pennycook's critique of Phillipson is based on the argument that an analysis of the relationship between language and empowerment cannot stop short of looking at how a language of power should be taught, I will draw on Pennycook in my exposition of the pedagogical fallacy. Because *Cultural Politics* does not simply critique English, but also suggests ways to teach it in a way that empowers students, I will present Pennycook's argument as a step forward in moving away from the critical model's tendency to cast pedagogical questions aside, with its excessive focus on English as a poacher, as gatekeeper, and as a colonizer of the mind. However, I will also look at Pennycook's teaching recommendations critically by highlighting those instances where they fall into the critical model by resorting too heavily on negative constructions of English.

As I expose the political fallacy, I will acknowledge again the importance of Pennycook's contribution for moving away from the critical model, because his review of colonial education policy statements in Malaya provides very convincing evidence of how English can function as a weapon for socio-economic empowerment. I will provide further evidence from the South African context and then highlight rhetorical similarities between colonial and apartheid education policy statements and current mother tongue advocacy arguments that rely too heavily on negative constructions of English. The focus of my critique will be Alexander's work, not only because of the impact it has had on the South African debate, but also because slips into the critical model run counter to his

language rights activism, which seeks to promote marginalized languages while granting wider access to English through a policy of additive bilingualism (Alexander, 2002) in accordance with the constitution and the 1997 Language in Education Policy statement.

### **i. The Epistemological Fallacy**

In the literature I encountered, I see the epistemological fallacy of the critical model operating most clearly in Phillipson's *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992). First of all, I am under the impression that there are tautological tendencies in the conceptual vocabulary that he uses to build his argument that the spread of English as an intranational and international lingua franca amounts to "linguistic imperialism."

Phillipson introduces the notion of "English Linguistic Imperialism" as a tool of analysis:

A working definition of English Linguistic Imperialism is that the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstruction of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. Here structural refers broadly to material properties (for example, institutions, financial allocations) and culture to immaterial or ideological properties (for example, attitudes, pedagogic principles). (1992, p. 47)

This "working definition" presents the thesis that the spread of English amounts to linguistic imperialism as an axiom: the alleged "dominance of English" is constructed as an imperialistic socio-political phenomenon by definition. Phillipson provides convincing evidence of how allegedly politically neutral cultural institutions such as the British Council and its American counterparts have taken steps to promote English in the

periphery to serve the interests of centers of power in the Metropole (pp. 137-171). However, the idea that the continued dominance of English after the fall of the British Empire can be ascribed *exclusively* to a successful conspiracy orchestrated by core-Anglophone countries which “asserts and maintains the establishment and continuous reconstruction of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages,” rather than to a more complex series of factors, is a theory that remains to be proven, rather than a fact that can be taken as a given.

Kachru (1986) acknowledges the role that European expansionism and white supremacy have played in spreading this language across the globe. At the same time, however, he argues that because English is spoken -- both as a first and as an additional language -- by so many people who are not of Anglo-Saxon extraction, English should be seen “less and less as a European language and an exclusive exponent of the Judeo-Christian tradition,” but that instead, it should be viewed as a language of international communication “with multiple cultural identities and traditions” (p. viii). He also urges us not to lose track of the value of this language, such as “its rich and varied literary tradition, its wide use in science and technology, and its capacity for absorption and acculturation in varied socio-cultural and linguistic contexts” (p. 116).

Phillipson, however, rejects the possibility that the power of English might stem, at least in part, from its functional use as a global lingua franca. He argues that presenting English as an international language can be a form of linguisticism and that English should be seen as a language of “wider colonization,” rather than as a “language of wider communication.”



There is a risk of EIL [English as International Language] fitting into a pattern of terms which glorify English and implicitly devalue other languages, of it being a linguistic label. Such terms as English as an International or Intranational Language can obscure the process by which the global linguistic hegemony of English is created and maintained and how English serves social stratificational purposes internationally. Labels might indirectly contribute to a lack of awareness of these dimensions. For this reason, the term 'English as a language of wider colonization' has been suggested, as an alternative to the familiar 'English as a language of wider communication,' so as to highlight the processes of linguistic hegemonic control and structural incorporation. (1992, p. 244)

While linguisticism, linguisticide, and linguistic imperialism do occur, it is reductive to see the spread of English exclusively in these terms. As Kachru has pointed out, we also need to take into account the "transformative" power of English, or its "alchemy":

The alchemy of English (present and future) . . . does not only provide social status, it also gives access to attitudinally and materially desirable domains of power. It provides a powerful linguistic tool for manipulation and control. In addition, this alchemy of English has left a deep mark on the languages and literature of the non-Western world. English has thus caused transmutation of languages, equipping them in the process for new societal, scientific, and technological demands. The process of Englishization has initiated stylistic and thematic innovations and has 'modernized' registers . . . It continues to provide unprecedented power for mobility and advancement to those native and non-native users who possess it as a linguistic tool. (1986, pp. 13-14)

In order to come to a sound understanding of the power valence of English, the critical model needs to be held in tension with the "alchemy" of this language. A discussion of the linguistic effects of English must take into account how English has helped equip other languages "for new societal scientific, and technological demands." A clear example of this can be seen in South Africa, where lexical borrowing from English is playing a key role in developing Bantu languages into media of instruction. Similarly, the gatekeeping effect of English must be juxtaposed with the way this language can let

people through the gate, if taught effectively. As Granville *et. al.* have written in response to a language policy document that bases the case for multilingualism in South Africa on negative constructions of English, "If everyone had access to English, English would no longer be an elitist language. In this way English could come to be seen as a resource, not as a problem" (1998, p. 259). Finally, one cannot make the "colonization of the mind" argument without doing justice to the way this language can be used to challenge power imbalances by giving access to counter hegemonic discourse such as the one created by Ngugi's critique, which would not have been as influential, had it not appeared in a language that is as widely understood internationally. As I will show in my discussion of the political fallacy (Chapter II, 3, iii), it is not without significance that the beneficiaries of inequitable socio-economic systems have often sought to restrict access to English.

Widdowson has taken a similar stance. His argument clinches the essence of the power dimension of English. While he recognizes that English can function as a gatekeeper, he also urges us to think about this language as the key that opens up the gate. Similarly, while he recognizes that English can carry discourses that promote the interests of those who are in power, he reminds us that this language has plenty of room for discourses that challenge these power relations.

It is often the case that English is the gatekeeping language, and its acquisition, therefore will provide access to economic and political power, because power is exercised by means of that language. But the challenge to that power can be mounted by the very same means . . . . English today is as much the language of dissent as of conformity, as witness the work of Canagarajah, Kachru, Pennycook, Phillipson and others . . . . You cannot use English to argue that its use precludes argument. There is a fundamental contradiction in the idea that the language of

itself exerts hegemonic control: namely, that if this were the case, you would never be able to challenge such control. This would mean that all those currently busy in exposing the evils of linguistic imperialism are, wittingly or not, part of the conspiracy they pretend to expose. (1998, 397)

In the concluding chapter of *Linguistic Imperialism*, Phillipson shows some awareness of the epistemological weaknesses of his argument by considering the possibility that he might have arrived at different conclusions, had he adopted a theoretical framework that does not posit such a deterministic relationship between the spread of English and *Linguistic Imperialism*:

One question that needs confronting is the adequacy of the existing theoretical framework for the study that has been undertaken. There are many relevant questions which further studies might clarify, for instance, are there periphery-English countries where an increased use of English has been accompanied by less exploitation, more democratization, and prosperity? In what contexts does ELT not involve linguistic imperialism or English linguistic imperialism? . . . . All that can be attempted here is to ask whether there is any evidence that has been overlooked because of the framework adopted, or whether a different theoretical framework would have led to quite different conclusions. (p. 314)

But a few paragraphs later, he again seals the border of his discourse by dismissing the idea that the analysis of the power dimension of English as an international language could be built on a theoretical framework that takes into account the ambivalent nature of the power effects of English:

It is a truism that English can be used either to promote or fight capitalism (which is itself full of contradictions) or to liberate people or to oppress them. But this argument ignores the structural power of English nationally and internationally. (p. 318)

If the suggestion that “English can be used to either promote or fight capitalism” is indeed “full of contradictions,” these need to be specified and examined, rather than presented as a given and then cast aside. Exploring the ambivalent power dimension of English would not ignore “the structural power of English nationally and internationally,” but it would lead to a deeper understanding of this structural power by opening up the discourse to “evidence that has been overlooked” and the possibility of “quite different conclusions” that could point to effective ways in which the inequities of this structural power can be challenged.

Pennycook acknowledges the value of Phillipson’s conspiracy theory, but he also points out the epistemological limitations that result from Phillipson’s failure to engage with the empowering potential of English.

Phillipson amply demonstrates how and why various governments and organizations have promoted the spread of English, but rarely explores what the effects of that promotion might be apart from maintaining global capitalism . . . . English linguistic imperialism, in conjunction with other forms of imperialism, remains the end point of analysis and leaves little space for consideration of how English is used in diverse contexts or how it is appropriated and used in opposition to those that promote its spread. (1994, pp. 56-57)

Pennycook also alerts us to the dire political and pedagogical repercussions that are connected to the epistemological weaknesses of Phillipson’s thesis.

There are a number of reasons for taking up this stance against deterministic theses that define the spread of English as a priori imperialistic, hegemonic, or linguisticist. First, this is part of a general struggle against all deterministic theses: whether we are dealing with a biological or socio-biological definition of women’s roles, a psycho-educational deficit theory to explain minority students’ ‘failure’ at school, or a fundamental understanding of creation and morality, we

are dealing with views antithetical to questions of social change. Second, it is in reaction to the totalizing tendencies of much critical theory, which, in its views of ideology, hegemony, superstructure, historical materialism, class structure, 'the masses,' 'the oppressed,' or the 'dominant group,' leave little space for struggle, resistance, change, and human agency or difference. Third, in response to the more specific location of those who have learned English, the experience has opened up new possibilities of personal gain and communal interaction, and to dismiss their learning and using English as colonization is to position them to a new academic imperialism. Finally, it addresses the need to develop some other space for those of us who teach English, for while it is important to do so with a critical awareness of the implications of the global spread of English, it is also crucial that we establish some way of teaching English that is not automatically an imperialistic project. (1994a, p. 69)

In the rest of Chapter II and in Chapter III, I will build on Pennycook's suggestion that "deterministic theses" and "totalizing tendencies" leave little room for "agency" and, consequently, can run counter to "questions of social change." The next section will take up the critical model's failure to "establish some way of teaching English that is not automatically an imperialist project." While I will draw on Pennycook to argue that pedagogical issues cannot be cast aside by those who are committed to use language to reduce power imbalances, I will also look at his teaching recommendations critically whenever they fall into the totalizing and deterministic traps of the critical model. In the concluding section of this chapter, I will discuss the negative political consequences that result from theories that rely too heavily on Marxist concepts such as "hegemony," "false consciousness" and "class structure" to construe the relationship between language and empowerment. In chapter III, I will suggest a poststructuralist framework as a way out of the epistemological, pedagogical, political limitations of the critical model.

## **ii. The Pedagogical fallacy**

The pedagogical fallacy of the critical model lies in its failure to deal adequately with the teaching implications of the power dimension of English. At times, this is because critics are so preoccupied with the need to expose what Ndebele has referred to as the “guilt of English” as the language of the colonizer (1997, p.11) that they do not engage sufficiently with what ought to be a central question for those who are committed to fighting social stratification through language: how can access to the language of power be given to those who are currently excluded from the benefits that come with its appropriation?

Bourdieu used his notion of “profit of distinction” to argue that a language can function as a gatekeeper only if it is accessible to a limited number of people in a sociolinguistic community:

The profit of distinction results from the fact that the supply of products (or speakers) corresponding to a given level of linguistic (or more generally, cultural) qualification is lower than it would be if all speakers had benefited from the conditions of acquisition of the legitimate competence to the same extent as the holders of the rarest competence. (1991, pp. 55-56)

As Bourdieu explains, “social inheritance” factors (1991, p. 55), such as home language and access to adequate schooling, play a major role in determining the extent to which an individual will be able to appropriate the language of power. In South Africa, for example, a child born into an English speaking family will be more likely to become proficient in this language than a child who is not. Similarly, a middle class native

speaker of a Bantu language will be much more likely to attain native or near-native fluency in English than a person with the same home language who grows up in a monolingual rural community with virtually no exposure to English and access to adequate schooling. But one of the main challenges for critical linguists lies precisely in finding ways to counterbalance these inheritance factors with pedagogy.

Pennycook (1994, p. 308) critiqued Phillipson for his reluctance to engage with the pedagogical implications of his argument. Indeed, Phillipson raises the crucial issue of what should be done with English instruction only in the last sentence of his book, where he asks: "Can ELT contribute constructively to greater linguistic and social equality, and if so, how could a critical ELT be committed, theoretically and practically, to combating linguicism?" (1992, p. 319). As Pennycook pointed out, Phillipson's main area of intervention is "language planning" and "linguistic human rights" (1994, p. 308), rather than language education, and the same can be said about Alexander, Tollefson, and other theorists who do not delve into the pedagogical implications of their constructions of the power of English. But pedagogy plays a key role in determining whether people are empowered or disempowered by the spread of English. Whether English acts as a gatekeeper or as the key to the gate of socio-economic empowerment; whether English colonizes or liberates minds; whether English kills or fosters the growth of marginalized languages depends, to a large extent, on how English is taught. This is why those who are committed to the fight against "linguicism" cannot stop short of engaging with pedagogical issues.

Pennycook rejects the suggestion that English instruction ought to be minimized, (1994a, p. 307) and instead, as a strategy for combating "linguicism" he recommends a

critical approach to English instruction. Drawing on the postcolonial concept of “writing back,” which explores how literature from the Periphery has used English to challenge the hegemonic cultural production of the Metropole, and on the work of critical pedagogues such as Giroux (1991), Pennycook (1994a, pp. 258-296) argues that English teachers ought to empower students by “teaching back.” This means embracing a “politically committed pedagogy” that does not teach the lexical and morpho-syntactic features of English as if language were a neutral means of communication, but that instead, takes a stance that is “oppositional to central language norms and to central discursive constructs” (p. 296). Pennycook’s recommendations call for a process of discursive intervention, which requires:

An understanding of how English is implicated in a range of social, cultural, economic, and political relations, how it might be linked, for example, to colonial history, to the invasion of North American popular culture, to struggles for economic and political ascendancy, to a split between public and private sectors of an economy, or to a schooling system which as a result promotes inappropriate forms of culture and knowledge. (p. 312)

English is indeed implicated in a “range of social, cultural, economic, and political relations” and these ought to be discussed, as part of the learning process. As I will argue in Chapter IV, the ability to exercise agency with respect to the discourses a student encounters as he/she learns an additional language is a key aspect of the process of appropriating an additional language. However, we must not lose track of the fact that any language -- not just English -- is implicated in these range of relations; therefore, this critical discussion should not be limited to English, but should extend to the other languages and dialects that are part of students’ linguistic repertoires. For example, in



South Africa, students could be encouraged to look at the use of the “generic he” in English in conjunction with politeness forms in Nguni languages which proscribe that married women refrain from using words that start with the first letters of the names of their male in-law family members.

Also, it is important that our understanding of how English is implicated in this “range of relations” not be marred by the epistemological tendentiousness of the critical model. There are clear echoes of Ndebele’s recommendation that “the guilt of English” be exposed in Pennycook’s citation of Searle as a valid premise for “teaching back.”

Let us be clear that the English language has been a monumental force and institution of oppression and rabid exploitation throughout 400 years of imperialist history. It attacked the black person who spoke it with its racist images and imperialist message, it battered the worker who toiled as its words expressed the parameters of his misery and the subjection of entire peoples in all the continents of the world. It was made to scorn the languages it sought to replace, and told the colonized peoples that mimicry of its primacy among languages was a necessary badge of their social mobility as well as their continued humiliation and subjection. Thus, when we talk of ‘mastery’ of the Standard language, we must be conscious of the terrible irony of the word, that the English language itself was the language of the master, the carrier of its arrogance and brutality.

Yet, as teachers, we seek to grasp the same language and give it a new content, to de-colonize its words, to de-mystify its meaning, and as workers taking over our own factory and giving our machines new lives, making it a vehicle for liberation, consciousness and love, to rip out its class assumption, its racism and appalling degradation of women, to make it truly common, to recreate it as a weapon for the freedom and understanding of our people. (In Pennycook, 1994a, p. 308)

Searle’s synthesis of the history of English reduces the power effect of this language to the three metaphors of the critical model. English is a linguistic poacher because it seeks to “replace” other languages; English is a gatekeeper because of the

“rabid exploitation” it inflicts on all those it excludes from socio-economic empowerment; English is a “colonizer of the mind,” because it subjugates black people, the working class, and women.

An epistemologically sound understanding of the “social, cultural, economic, and political relations” in which English is implicated cannot construe the power of this language exclusively in terms of “a monumental force and institution of oppression and rabid exploitation.” The “racist imagery” with which it attacked the black person must be discussed together with the way this language allowed the formation of the Black Consciousness / Black Power movements which fed on the counter hegemonic discourse produced in English by black intellectuals such as Malcom X in the United States, and Steven Biko in South Africa. If English “battered the worker,” it also allowed intellectual and grassroots labor movements to fight this exploitation and to make the working class a political force to be reckoned with in England starting from the late Victorian Period. Similarly, a discussion of the alleged “appalling degradation” that English inflicts on women must take into account the feminist literature that has appeared in this language at least since the time of Mary Wollstonecraft (1792).

More importantly, from a pedagogical point of view, I do not think it would be productive to expose “the guilt of English” before teaching this language. Relying heavily on negative constructions of English as a premise for its teaching might create resentment towards this language and hamper its appropriation. In order for a student to engage in the process of learning an additional language, there has to be a desire to do so. It is harder to find this desire if the language in question is characterized as a “monumental force and institution of oppression and rabid exploitation” and if the need

for its mastery is presented primarily in terms of power imbalances which put students in the position of underdogs.

Critical pedagogy tends to label students -- explicitly or implicitly -- as "oppressed," "exploited," "marginalized," and "colonized." As we will see in Chapter III, several TESOL theorists have expressed concern about the way students are labeled -- often with good intentions -- in the field. For now, I would like to argue that students might have a much more positive perception of their personal status and of the status of their mother tongue, and that characterizing them as victims to the extent that Pennycook's pedagogical recommendations sometimes do might actually be psychologically and pedagogically damaging.

I made this point in an informal response to an article published by two colleagues of mine from Bronx Community College, who were suggesting a "teaching back" approach in order to help Dominican students "develop high levels of fluency in Spanish" while mastering academic literacy in English. Pita and Utakis (2002) wrote that:

Since Dominicans in New York speak a low prestige variety of a low prestige language, it is especially important for teachers to help students value their own language. One way to do that is by helping students become aware of the historic, social, and economic reasons why some language varieties are more valued than others and why Spanish is despised in this country. (p. 325)

I certainly agree with my colleagues that it is important for teachers to encourage learners to value their home language, and I commend the eloquence with which they argued that the appropriation of English does not require the loss of Spanish. However, I would be uncomfortable with having a conversation with my Dominican students that

started from the assumption that they are native speakers of “a low prestige variety” of a “language that is despised.”

While there are certainly people who look down on this language, I am not sure whether this view can be presented in such general terms. Indeed, Spanish is often associated with the “ghetto,” drug dealing, functional illiteracy, and menial employment, but also with the seminal impact Don Quixote has had on the rise of the English novel, and also with the fascination that Latino pop-idols such as Ricky Martin and Christina Aguilera exert on the minds of many Anglophone Americans. Nor must we forget that Spanish is beginning to function as a gatekeeper, as shown by President Bush’s speeches in this language and by the increasing number of openings for professional positions that require fluency in this language.

Most importantly, I would be uncomfortable with asking my students to think of why “Spanish is despised” in the U.S. because they might have a much more positive perception of their mother tongue -- and hence, of their status. The last thing I would want is to alter that perception for the worse by presenting as a general view the negative perception that some people in this country undoubtedly have of Spanish.

I am also concerned about the possibility of seeing the sort of “discursive intervention” Pennycook calls for in his pedagogic recommendation degenerate into “discursive policing” that could limit students’ right to speak. Widdowson has alerted us to the danger of critical pedagogy turning into indoctrination:

Critical people, like missionaries, seem to be fairly confident that they have identified what is good for other people on the basis of their own beliefs. But by making a virtue of the necessity of partiality, we in effect deny plurality and

impose our own version of reality, thereby exercising the power of authority which we claim to deplore. (2001, p. 15)

Indeed, Pennycook's "teaching back" approach is very prescriptive about students taking on adversarial positions with respect to dominant discourses:

The voices that we are seeking to help students to find and to create are insurgent voices, voices that speak in opposition to the local and global discourses that limit and produce the possibilities that frame our students' lives. (p. 311)

While I certainly agree that the teaching of English should give students the possibility to speak "in opposition to the local and global discourses" Pennycook deconstructs, I would argue that it is just as important not to pressure students into internalizing "insurgent voices," lest critical pedagogy itself degenerate into a discourse that limits what students can say with English and "the possibilities that frame" their lives. This risk is very high, given the power imbalances that characterize linguistic exchanges in most classroom settings. Teachers of English as an additional language or dialect are generally more rhetorically equipped to have a discussion in an academic context than their students. More importantly, teachers evaluate students, which means that they act as gatekeepers. We must not give our students the impression that they have to adopt a particular kind of discourse -- be that hegemonic or counter hegemonic -- in order for them to meet the requirements of a language course. This sort of pressure would actually run counter to the process of appropriating a language. I shall discuss the meaning of appropriating language in Chapter IV. For now, I would like to point out that in order for students to own language and use it to their own advantage, they have to be

encouraged to exercise agency by deciding how they want to place themselves with respect to the discourses they encounter. This means that students need to be exposed to a wide range of discourses and be encouraged to draw on them critically and idiosyncratically, as they negotiate their social positions in the world. As critical teachers, we should be open to the possibility that students might choose to empower themselves by embracing “central discursive constructs” as we are open to the possibility that they might indeed decide to adopt “insurgent voices.”

### iii. The Political fallacy

Part of the political fallacy lies in not taking sufficiently into account how English can be used as an instrument for progressive socio-economic change. As we have seen, for Ngũgĩ (1981), the use of English in the African continent results in a process of cultural castration that makes minds subservient towards Western discourses that perpetuate the power imbalances established through centuries of colonialism. He rejects Achebe’s position that English, despite having been the language of the colonizer, can be used to affirm a positive African identity (Chapter II, 2,iii).

Phillipson’s theory of *Linguistic Imperialism* also leaves very little room for the possibility that the growth of English as an international and intranational lingua franca can somehow empower those who are not born into this language. I have already

discussed the epistemological weaknesses of the failure to take sufficiently into account the empowering potential of English, when looking at the spread of this language critically. From a political point of view, this failure can result in a missed opportunity to use English for fighting inequitable power structures.

Pennycook does not miss the opportunity to explore how English can be used as a weapon of empowerment. His notion of “writing back,” despite the limitations I have pointed out in the previous section, is a major step forward in problematizing the “colonization of the mind” argument, which negates the possibility that the use of English can in any way empower those who are not of British extraction.

Pennycook also needs to be given credit for having exposed how the process that leads to the “colonization of the mind” relied not only on the imposition of English (“Anglicism”), but also on “Orientalism” (1994, pp.73-106; 1998, pp. 66-93). In Edward Said’s notion, the term “Orientalism” refers to the process through which the West constructs an idealized, normative image of its “Self” built in antithesis to negative constructions of cultures that are rooted in other parts of the world (the “Other”).

Orientalism is never far from . . . the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying ‘us’ Europeans as against all ‘those non Europeans,’ and indeed, it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. (Said, 1978, p. 7)

Pennycook uses this term more specifically to refer to colonial educational policies that sought to restrict access to the language of power while promoting the use of the mother tongue. These policies also imposed on “the native” an essentialized notion of

indigenous culture. For Pennycook, “Anglicism” and “Orientalism” are both essential components of the process that leads to the mental domination of the colonized.

It seems that rather than Anglicism replacing Orientalism, the two ideologies in fact operated alongside each other . . . . The promotion of education in local languages was as much part of colonialism as was the promotion of English . . . . The denial of access to English may have been as important for colonialism as the insistence on English. (1994a, p. 74)

He makes this point very effectively by quoting educational policy statements made in the 19th Century by a governor of the British colony of Malaya:

The one danger to be guarded against is an attempt to teach English indiscriminately. It could not be well taught except in a few schools, and I do not think that it is at all advisable to attempt to give to the children of an agricultural population an indifferent knowledge of a language that to all but the very few would only unfit them for the duties of life and make them discontented with anything like manual labor. (Perak Annual Report, 1890, p. 16. In Pennycook, 1994, p. 86) . . . . Whilst we teach children to read and write in their own languages or Malay . . . we are safe. (Perak Government Gazette, 6 July 1894, in Pennycook, 1994a, p. 86)

The following passage explains very clearly what the colonizer meant by mother tongue instruction being “safe”:

Thousands of our boys are taken away from idleness, and whilst learning to read and write in their own languages, to cipher a little to know something of geography, to write Malay in the Roman character, and to take an active learning in physical exercise and manly sports, at the same time acquire habits of industry, obedience, punctuality, order, neatness, cleanliness, and general good behavior . . . . After a boy has been a year or two at school, he is found to be less lazy at home, less given to evil habits and mischievous adventure, more respectful and dutiful, much more willing to help his parents, and with sense enough not to entertain any



ambition beyond following the humble home occupation he has been taught to respect . . . . The school also inspires a respect for the vernacular; and I am of the opinion that if there is any lingering feeling of dislike of the white man, the school tends greatly to remove it, for the people see that the government has really their welfare at heart by providing them with this education, free, without compulsion, and with their greatest consideration for their Mohammedan sympathies. (Reports on the Federal Malay States, 1901, p. 177, in Pennycook, 1994a, 88)

Clearly, English is not a precondition for colonizing minds, nor does mother tongue instruction guarantee emancipationist discourse. Phillipson's claim that "English imperialism . . . . occurs *whenever* English plays a major role in the education system and in the transmission of social values in an underdeveloped country" [my emphasis] (1992, p. 52) must be problematized. These pieces of historical evidence show that from a political point of view, it is crucial to look at how *any* language "can be used for good and bad purposes," rather than simply equating the spread of English with linguistic imperialism. The Governor of Malaya understood very well that mother tongue instruction could also serve imperialist interests by colonizing the minds of the "natives" and keeping them outside the gate of socio-economic mobility.

The weaknesses of Phillipson's sweeping generalization also becomes apparent if one takes a look at educational policy statements made in South Africa prior to the transition to democracy in 1994. Hendrik Verwoerd, who is considered one of the main architects of apartheid, was very uneasy about educated black South Africans' "desire to show off their knowledge of English." His 1954 parliament speech was quite explicit about why the Nationalist Party felt compelled to replace English medium missionary school education for black South Africans with government controlled Bantu Education:

By blindly producing pupils trained on a European model, the vain hope was created among natives that they could occupy posts within the European community despite the country's policy of apartheid. This creation of unhealthy 'white collar ideals' is causing widespread frustration among the so called educated natives. This is the class that has learnt to believe that it is above its people and feels that its spiritual, economic, and political home is among the civilized community of South Africa, i.e. the Europeans, and feels frustrated because its wishes have not been realized. (In Rose and Turner, 1975, p. 261)

The Eiselen report, which laid the foundations for Verwoerd's speech, warned against the damage that could be inflicted by "schools which are concerned with the transmission of ideas, values, and attitudes and skills which have not been developed in Bantu society." The report also denounced how "the staggering power and glitter of Western culture has made the educated Bantu despise their own culture," and as a remedy, suggested the promotion of African languages. Again, there is a clear awareness in the oppressor of the "alchemy of English": the apartheid government realized that "the transformative" power of English was likely to make the oppressed dissatisfied with their place in society and demand a more equitable distribution of socio-economic power.

Obviously, the political intentions of the architects of apartheid are antithetical to the intentions of Ngugi, when he posits the existence of a "biological," "national" identity for Africans that is incompatible with English and the Western values that allegedly come with this language (Chapter II, 2, iii). However, the rhetorical similarities between the pieces of colonial discourse we have seen and the "colonization of the mind" argument ought to alert us to the danger of resorting to essentialized notions of culture and identity to argue that as an additional language, English is bound to remain "foreign," "alien," and ultimately, culturally crippling (Phillipson, 1992, p. 285).

Similarly, those committed to combating “linguicism,” ought to be wary of dismissing the desire for English that comes from speakers of other languages in the Periphery as a symptom of the “colonization of their minds” with notions such as “false consciousness” or “hegemony.” Phillipson (1992, p. 286) writes that “the ideal way to make people do what you want is to make them want it themselves.” Applying this notion to the findings of a study carried out in Namibia, he concludes that illiterate parents’ high rating of English reflects their submission to hegemonic ideas. Referring to similar studies carried out in South Africa, Alexander argues that generally speaking, these preferences are a symptom of “false consciousness”: “Because of the hegemonic effects of domination, generally speaking, surveys of the kinds on which these studies are based can, at best, indicate the extent of what we can advisedly call false consciousness” (2000, p. 21).

I do not want to deny the existence of “false consciousness,” but I think that we have to exercise extreme caution whenever we resort to this concept as an explanation for a socio-political phenomenon. Epistemologically, the “false consciousness” argument can seal the borders of a discourse by dismissing dissenting views with the claim that those who hold those views do not know any better. Politically, the concept of “false consciousness” can degenerate into an instrument of social control. “False consciousness” implies that there are “people who know” and “people who don’t know,” and that those who don’t know should be told what to do.

Of course, Phillipson and Alexander are not advocating the use of coercion, but are only recommending that native speakers of African languages be put in a position where they can make informed decisions about the medium of instruction for their

children. But the suggestion that the desires of black South Africans are “false” carries eerie echoes of colonial rhetoric that are not going to fall well on the ears of those who are suffering the price of colonial legacies.

In the following passage, taken from a 1882 report on education in the Cape Colony, a historian of the time reflects on the opportunity to invite “the natives” to have a say on matters concerning their education:

Would you give the natives a voice in the matter? -- I do not think it would be much use. The native voice is after all the voice of the man who has control over them. In speaking of the native voice, you speak of something which really does not exist. (Teal, In Rose and Turner, 1975, p. 213)

Again, the political agendas behind these conclusions and language rights activists’ use of the concept of “false consciousness” could not be more different. The rhetorical similarities, however, are striking, and in a country like South Africa, where English is associated with the struggle for the liberation of the majority of its people (Norton Peirce, 1989; Kamwangamalu, 2002) and Bantu languages and Afrikaans with racist exploitation, suggesting that black South Africans need to be protected from English could be an impediment for the promotion of African languages.

I made this point in a paper I presented at the international conference of the Southern African Applied Linguistics Association (2004). Bridging the gap between South Africa’s language policies (which grant equal status to the eleven official languages) and practices (which make English a *de facto* gatekeeper) requires the will to promote Bantu languages. This will must come from the speakers of these languages. As

Neville Alexander (2003) has rightly pointed out, the African elite has no interest in seeing their native tongues play a more important role in the country's political, economic, and cultural life, since they have appropriated English sufficiently to be able to reap its "profit of distinction." And the black working class, faced with the need to make ends meet in an economy where English is a precondition for most forms of employment, is more preoccupied with ensuring their children access to the language of power than with questions of linguistic genocide or colonization of the mind.

It is unlikely that the African middle class will voluntarily follow Alexander's recommendation that they commit "class suicide" by refraining from using English as a status symbol (2003, p. 15). Nor is it likely that the black working class is going to be persuaded by the "false consciousness" argument. If anything, the eerie echoes of colonial rhetoric carried by the suggestion that black South Africans must be protected from English are likely to reinforce an equation that Alexander has referred to as one of "the most baneful legacies of apartheid"; that is, the idea that English = Liberation, and that Afrikaans and Bantu Languages = apartheid. Obviously, this equation does not make sense. As we have seen, there is nothing intrinsically oppressive or liberating about any language. At the same time, however, it would not make sense either to replace this equation with another one that is just as fallacious: English = Oppression; Bantu Languages = Liberation

Of course, unlike the founding fathers of apartheid, most critics of English are not against giving access to the language of power; instead, they believe in giving this access while promoting marginalized languages. Alexander, for instance, explicitly rejects the "joy of English bashing" (2003, p.11) and exhorts the public not to see the language

question in terms of an “either English” or “mother tongue” logic (2002). A similar stance is taken by Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas:

We claim that it is perfectly possible to match up ethnolinguistic and socio-economic concerns -- there is no necessary contradiction. Likewise children need two or more languages in education learned additively. It is not a question of either the mother tongue or a dominant language, but two or more. No language needs to be sacrificed in additive learning. (2001, p. 143)

Indeed, the idea that the appropriation of English and the development of the mother tongue are mutually exclusive is a misconception and a major obstacle in the implementation of the 1997 Language in Education Policy. Language rights activists should not reinforce this misconception by resorting excessively to negative constructions of English. If the case for the need to promote marginalized languages is made by characterizing English as a gatekeeper, a linguistic poacher, and a colonizer of the mind, it is easier to conclude that those who want to promote the mother tongue are “anti-English.” Moreover, dangerous rhetorical moves -- such as the “false consciousness” argument -- or the use of essentialized notions of culture and identity to argue that speakers of marginalized languages need “protection” from English, evoke memories of colonial discourse that are unlikely to win support for the planet’s “linguistic biodiversity” from the speakers of endangered languages. The central argument for the promotion of marginalized languages ought to be that access to English and the development of the mother tongue are two sides of the same coin (Chapter I).

## **Chapter III**

### **Beyond the Critical Model**

This chapter will draw on post-structuralism to suggest a conceptual vocabulary that can help theorize about language and empowerment without slipping into “deterministic theses” and “totalizing tendencies” that lie at the root of the epistemological, pedagogical, and political weaknesses of the critical model. The first section will examine the notion of subjectivity as a key concept for understanding how language can empower and disempower. I will argue that in order to capture the intricacies of the way language and discourse shape the construction of the self, it is important to move away from seeing identity as a fixed, monolithic entity that can be construed simply as the product of socio-demographic descriptors such as race, gender, and cultural background. While these factors certainly contribute to the definition of who we are, how we see our selves, and how we are seen by the people with whom we interact, individuals also exercise a degree of agency in the process through which their social identity is created. As I mentioned in Chapter I, theories of empowerment must recognize that there are structural factors that limit our ability to determine who we are; empowerment is about reducing the limitations imposed by these structural factors. At the same time, however, envisioning social change must allow for the possibility that as individuals, people play some role in determining the course of their lives.

## 1. Poststructuralist Conceptions of Identity and Culture

The three metaphors of the critical model rely heavily on what Weedon (1987) has referred to as a conception of the subject, which “presupposes an essence at the heart of the individual which is fixed and coherent and make her what she is” (p. 32).

As we have seen, the “colonization of the mind” argument starts from the assumption that identity is defined by a “biological nationality” that cannot be chosen, and that there is a fixed, univocal “African reality” that should lie at the roots of the “communal definition” of the African nation (Chapter II, 2, iii). Ngugi takes into account the possibility that a subject might be not be unified, but only as a result of colonialism’s disruption of the symbiotic relationship between the African individual and the “African reality.” If an African is exposed to the Western “cultural bomb,” disunity does occur; the “African” stops seeing himself as an African, which results in colonial alienation, and ultimately, subjugation (1981, pp. 1-3).

The poacher and the gatekeeper metaphors also assume that individuals can be easily cast into social groups according to fixed factors that can be ascribed to birth. “Linguicide” equates the death of a language to the cultural death of its speakers. The implicit assumption is that individuals are the product of their culture and that their culture can only be carried by their language of birth. Similarly, the idea that language can act as a mechanism to exclude from privilege presupposes that the access to the language of power is determined by “social inheritance” factors that are determined by birth (Chapter II, 2).



In order to theorize about language and empowerment it is important to see the borders between social groups as being more permeable and to see individuals as fluid, polycentric subjects who cannot be defined simply in terms of a limited series of factors that are established by birth. Drawing on Postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha (1994), I would argue that it is “theoretically innovative and politically crucial” to “think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities” defined by monolithic and deterministic conceptions of identity markers such as race, class, gender, and essentialized conceptions of culture. Instead, we should “focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (p. 1). The “in between spaces” of cultural hybridity that open up when traditional dichotomies such as Orient and Occident melt into continua could actually constitute sites of resistance against hegemonic discourses that limit the possibilities for the construction of the self.

Ngugi’s thesis is one of these sites of resistance that emerged out of what Bhabha refers to as an “interstice,” or a fluid, polycentric cultural space that results from “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference” (p. 3). *Decolonizing the Mind* is an affirmation of the author’s African identity. This affirmation, however, found expression in a language that emanated from the West and draws heavily -- even if critically -- on some of the milestones of Western intellectual thought (Chapter III, 2, iii).

As Bhabha points out:

The ‘right’ to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictories that attend upon the lives of those who are ‘in the minority.’ The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. In restating the past, it

introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition. This process estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a 'received' tradition. (p. 2)

Affirming the "right to signify from the Periphery," then, requires a "complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation," (p. 2) rather than Ngugi's attempt to reverse colonial dichotomies by defining a peripheral Self in terms of a fixed, essentialized African "biological nationality" set up in antithesis to a "removed," "decadent," and "reactionary" Metropolitan Other (Ngugi, 1981, p. 3).

It is exactly this "complex, ongoing negotiation" process that we need to focus on in order to avoid the trappings of the critical model. Instead of assuming that descriptors such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, cultural background determine subjectivity univocally and exhaustively, we should constantly be asking ourselves the following questions, as we try to unravel the intricacies of language, power, and identity:

How are subjects formed "in between," or in excess of the parts of difference (usually intoned as race/gender/class, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings, and priorities many not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual, and even incommensurable? (Bhabha, 1994, p. 3)

I found Weedon's conception of identity a useful starting point for a theory of language and empowerment that addresses Bhabha's crucial questions. Weedon (1987) writes that language and discourse are primary sites for the construction of subjectivities and the establishment of power relations:

Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organizations and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is *constructed*. The assumption that subjectivity is constructed implies that it is not innate, not genetically determined, but socially produced. Subjectivity is produced in a whole range of discursive practices -- economic, social and political -- the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power. (1987, p. 21)

The notion that “subjectivity is produced in a whole range of discursive practices” has something in common with Gee’s suggestion that discourses are “identity kits” (Chapter I). Weedon’s conception, however, seems to posit a more complex relationship between discourse and identity formation. Unlike Gee, Weedon does not claim that individuals can be easily classified according to their position with respect to discourse (Chapter I); for Weedon, subjectivity is not monolithic but multi-centered; it is not established unproblematically, but it is contested; it is not fixed, but it evolves as individuals move across time and space (1987, pp. 21-42).

Norton Peirce<sup>2</sup>, whose theory of social identity I shall review (Chapter III, 3), expounds on the salient characteristics of subjectivity highlighted by Weedon. Peirce’s interpretation emphasizes the importance of taking agency into account when looking at how subjectivity is socially produced.

The conception of subjectivity as a site of struggle is an extension of the position that social identity is multiple and contradictory. Subjectivity is produced in a variety of social sites, all of which are structured by relations of power in which the person takes up different subject positions -- teacher, mother, manager, critic - - some positions of which may be in conflict with each other. In addition, the subject is not conceived of as passive: he/she is conceived of as both subject of

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<sup>2</sup> The same author has published articles as Norton Peirce, as Norton, and as Peirce. From now on, I will use Peirce to refer to her work in the text, as this is the way her work is most often cited.

and subject to relations of power within a particular site, community and society. The subject has human agency. Thus the subject position that a person takes up within a particular discourse is open to argument. Although a person may be positioned in a particular way within a given discourse, the person might resist the subject position or even set up a counter-discourse which positions the subject in a powerful, rather than a marginalized position. . . . In arguing that subjectivity is multiple, contradictory and a site of struggle, feminist poststructuralism highlights the changing quality of a person's social identity. (1997, pp. 15-16)

## 2. From "Labeling" to "Open" Conceptual Categories

In Chapter II, I looked at instances where the critical model's "totalizing tendencies" result in the labeling of native speakers of languages other than English according to essentialized social categories. For example, in Chapter II, 3, ii, I argued that Pennycook's "teaching back" approach implicitly characterizes students as "oppressed," "marginalized," and "exploited." In Chapter II, 3, iii, I pointed out that the "colonization of the mind" argument labels "non-native" English speakers in the periphery according to essentialized conceptions of culture and ethnicity that are evocative of the Orientalizing processes through which colonial powers sought to control the mental universe of their subjects. In the rest of this section, I will look at recent TESOL contributions that have drawn on a poststructuralist understanding of culture and subjectivity to theorize without falling into excessive determinism and essentialism.

Spak (1997) and Kubota (2001) have expressed concern with the way students are labeled -- often with good intentions -- by those who theorize about learning English as a second language or dialect. Spak alerts us to the danger of categorizing students according to cultural stereotypes and points out that defining subjectivity for the Other in

terms of essentialized understandings of culture is a process that can foster power imbalances:

Even if our reasons are well intended, we need to consider that in the process of labeling students, we put ourselves in the powerful position of rhetorically constructing their identities, a potentially hazardous enterprise. At worst, a label may imply that we sanction an ethnocentric stance. At the very least, it can lead us to stigmatize, to generalize, and to make inaccurate predictions about what students are likely to do as a result of their language or cultural back-ground. (p. 765)

Like Weedon, Spak sees subjectivity as something that is not fixed, monolithic, and unambiguously determined by a person's cultural back-ground, especially if a person moves across linguistic, geographical, and cultural borders the way English learners often do. Like Bhabha, she sees the notion of "hybridity" as being crucial for understanding how culture affects subjectivity:

As scholars in this field, we need to conduct research and write in a such a way as to reflect the complexity and hybridity of culture when students literally and figuratively cross borders. If we essentialize students, we give others permission to do so. And there is evidence that we are perpetuating cultural myths from one article to another in our publications. (Spak, 1997, p. 768)

Spak then gives examples of how Asian students are essentialized in the discipline and concludes by urging teachers and researchers to:

View students as individuals, not as members of cultural groups, in order to understand the complexity of writing in a language they are in the process of acquiring. We will then see that cultural identities are not static, but always in motion, not frozen for inspection. (pp. 768-772)

Kubota makes similar recommendations highlighting culture's multifaceted, contested, and fluid nature:

ESL professionals and applied linguistics researchers are active participants in constructing and consuming various images of world cultures, including their own. Although they must avoid an ethnocentric view that champions Western culture and the English language and ignores or debases non-Western languages and cultures, they must also recognize that different cultures are made discursively. It is imperative that teachers and researchers critically examine the underlying ideologies and the social, cultural and educational consequences of perpetuating the commonplace notion of cultural differences. (p. 32)

Nelson's (1998) response to Spak's contribution raises some valid points: classifying and categorizing is an unavoidable cognitive process that is essential for people to make sense of their natural and social environment; seeing students as members of cultural groups does not mean that they cannot be seen also as individuals; getting to know people can only happen with time.

In using the term labeling, Spak has chosen a term that in American English has negative connotations when applied to people. More neutral terms for the same phenomenon are classifying or categorizing, the ordering or arrangement of phenomena 'based on observable or inferred properties' (Sokal, 1977, p. 187). The process of classifying, categorizing, or labeling is cognitive. It is what our brain does. We cannot not classify! Classifying is necessary because the 'world consists of a virtually infinite number of discriminately different stimuli' (Rosch 1977, p. 212) and classifying helps us make order of and process those stimuli . . .

Students (and other human beings) are both members of groups and individuals, not one or the other . . . Getting to know a person on a psychological or personal level takes time. It is a process. It is an end to aspire to, but it is an impossible place to begin. (Nelson, 1998, pp. 727-730)

Thesen's (1997) theoretical framework and her research methodology can be used to reconcile Kubota's and Spak's recommendation with Nelson's objections. Thesen

shares Spak's and Kubota's concern with the way students are mislabeled within TESOL and calls for the need to expand "the repertoire of identity categories by which [educators] describe the complex and often contradictory stances students take in the acquisition of academic literacy" (p. 487). At the same time, she acknowledges that:

Naming is inevitable and useful: equitable educational policy cannot happen without it. But categories have to be kept open and accurate, and their role in creating discourse needs to be understood. The processes that should keep naming open are time consuming and require a consideration of the fullest range of social experience. (p. 490)

Thesen points out the limitations in the way the notion of discourse has been used to describe "the complex and contradictory stances that accompany the acquisition of English in complex settings." With its excessive emphasis on the social aspect of identity formation, discourse theory:

overlooks the focus of individual accounts. Learners are categorized according to a limited set of identity markers, which results in a deterministic view of identity in terms of the researcher's imposed categories. (p. 488)

In order to understand the complex interplay between "the individual and the social," or how identity construction results from "the dynamic interaction between the fixed identity categories that are applied to social groupings (such as race, gender, ethnicity, language) . . . and the way individuals think of themselves as they move through the different discourses in which these categories are salient" (p. 488), Thesen suggests using the notion of "voice" in conjunction with the notion of discourse:

Discourse is about constraints, codes, and restrictions on language in institutional settings. This view stresses the social envelope in which literacy events take place and the way these discourses create insiders and outsiders in the educational process. The construct of voice carries with it the individual perspective which is often silent in large institutions . . . . These two categories [should be] held against one another in a state of tension; they are linguistic representations of the fundamental tensions between structure and agency in social life. (p. 494)

The interviews she carried out with black South African Students at the University of Cape Town show that in the formation of the different identities that emerge as students move across different social contexts, “students are clearly agentic, making choices about where to merge and where to resist, assessing whether a strategy is working or not” (p. 504).

Her findings highlight the need to complement discourse analysis methodology with “opportunities for individuals to speak for themselves” when drawing conclusions from an interview text:

The way the curriculum simultaneously alienated and disempowered Robert and the challenges that the [tribal] ethnicity posed for the students are insights that could only have been derived from asking questions about intentions, rather than imposing my own homogenizing categories on texts. (p. 505)

She points out the value of bringing the “locus of interpretation closer to students” not only for the purposes of research methodology, but also as a way to keep the inevitable naming process open and more accurate. Asking students to comment on which discourses they perceive themselves to be operating in (i.e., listening to their “voice”) is a process that can generate new categories, which “increases the points of intersection between different identities” (p. 507).



### **3. A Comprehensive Theory of Social Identity for Additional Language Learning**

Peirce's (1995, p. 10-11) "comprehensive theory of social identity" is very useful for understanding the intricacies of the relationship between language, power and identity. Her contribution also grew out of a concern with the extent to which TESOL theorists resort to labeling to theorize about the learning process. Her critique focuses on models that have been used to explain students' likelihood to succeed in the learning of an additional language. These models have assumed that students can be easily categorized as "introverted /extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited" (Krashen 1981) or "socially distant" or "socially close" to the target language group (Schumann, 1978). Peirce contends that these models have failed to address:

Why it is that learners may sometimes be motivated, extroverted, and confident and sometimes unmotivated and anxious; why in one place there may be social distance between a specific group of language learners and the target language community, whereas in another place the social distance might be minimal; why a learner can sometimes speak and other times remain silent. (1995, p. 11)

According to her, this failure arises from the fact that second language acquisition theorists:

Have not developed a comprehensive theory of social identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context. Furthermore, they have not questioned how relations of power in the social world affect social interaction between second language learners and target language speakers. (1995, p. 12)

To develop this “comprehensive theory of social identity,” Peirce draws on Weedon’s poststructuralist conception of subjectivity by highlighting the three salient aspects we saw in the first section of this chapter: subjectivity is multi-centered, it is a “site of struggle” and it is not fixed. Peirce then draws on West (1992) to claim that the shaping of subjectivity is driven by desire:

Identity relates to desire -- the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety. Such desires, West asserts, cannot be separated from the distribution of material resources in society. People who have access to a wide range of resources in a society will have access to power and privilege which will in turn influence how they understand their relationship to a world and their possibilities for the future. (1997, p. 410)

She then complements her model by citing Bourdieu to claim that symbolic resources -- such as status and prestige -- also need to be taken into account in order to understand how the interplay between desire, subjectivity and power relations affect communicative performance in an additional language:

Bourdieu’s (1977) work complements West’s because it focuses on the relationship between identity and symbolic power . . . . Bourdieu argues that value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks, and the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger social networks of social relationships -- many of which may be unequally structured. (1997, p.410)

Because speaking takes place within these “larger social networks of social relationships” which are often characterized by power imbalances, Pierce urges both theoretical and applied linguists not to lose track of the “unequally structured” social relationships in which linguistic exchanges often take place. This means taking into account what Bourdieu refers to as the “right to speak”/ “right to impose reception” as an essential component of communicative competence.

[Bourdieu's] position is that linguists (and, I would argue, a lot of applied linguists) take for granted the conditions for the establishment of communication: that those who speak regard those who listen as worthy to listen and that those who listen regard those who speak as worthy to speak. I have argued, however, that it is precisely these assumptions that must be called into question. Bourdieu (1977) argues persuasively that an expanded definition of competence should include ‘the right to speak,’ or ‘the power to impose reception.’ (1997, p. 411)

Peirce then suggests looking at the notion of ‘investment’ to understand the way in which “the right to speak” is affected by the way students’ identities are constructed “in the larger network of social relationships” in which the language in question is used.

Because “the right to speak” intersects in important ways with a language learner’s identity, I have used the term investment to signal the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desires to learn and practice it . . . . The construct of investment conceives of the language learner as having a complex history and multiple desires. An investment in the target language is also an investment in the learner’s social identity, which changes across time and space. (p. 1997, p. 411)

The data Peirce collected with her “classroom-based social research” confirmed that students’ ability to communicate competently in English was affected by the extent to which they could claim the “right to speak” and that their ability to claim this right was

inextricably related to the allocation of material and symbolic resources. Her students' ability to "impose reception" declined whenever they had a high level of symbolic and material investment in the speech act in question.

All women felt uncomfortable talking to people in whom they had particular symbolic or material investment. Eva, who came to Canada for 'economical advantage' and was eager to work with anglophones, practice her English, and better get jobs, was silenced when the customers in her workplace made comments about her accent. Mai, who came to Canada for her life in the future and depended on the wishes of management for her job security and financial independence, was most uncomfortable speaking to her boss. Katarina, who came to Canada to escape a communist and atheistic regime, and had a great affective investment in her status as a professional, felt most uncomfortable talking to her teacher, doctor, and other anglophone professionals. (1995, p. 19)

Peirce's data also confirms that the social identities students take on as second language English speakers vary across time and space, equipping them with different levels of symbolic and material resources and varying degrees of ability to "impose reception." For example, as time went by, one of Peirce's students was able to shift her social identity from "immigrant" to "multi-cultural citizen."

The data suggests that nobody acknowledged Eva because she had the subject position of an immigrant. As Eva put it, she was someone who was not fluent in English; she was 'not Canadian,' she was 'stupid,' she had the 'worst type of work in the store' . . . . As Eva's sense of who she was, and how she related to the social world began to change, she started to challenge her subject position in the workplace as an illegitimate speaker of English . . . . Her purpose was to introduce her own history and experiences into the workplace in the hope that her symbolic resources would be validated . . . . As Eva continued to develop what I have called an identity as a multicultural citizen, she developed with it an awareness of her right to speak. (1995, p.24)

Peirce's notion of "investment" points to the need to look at the concept of "language ownership" in order to understand how the interplay between the desire for symbolic / material resources and identity construction affects the learning of an additional language:

If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wide range of symbolic and material resources which in turn will increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners will expect or hope to have a good return on that investment -- a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources. (1995, p. 17)

The extent to which additional language speakers can appropriate the material and symbolic resources that come into play in a linguistic exchange correlates with the extent to which they can claim ownership of the language in question: "If learners of English cannot claim ownership of a language, they might not consider themselves legitimate speakers of that language" (Bourdieu, in Peirce, 1997, p. 422). Therefore, it is important to explore the notion of ownership, in order to understand how the return on investment in the learning process can be maximized.

## CHAPTER IV

### Understanding Language Ownership

In the previous chapter, I quoted Bhabha to argue that theories of empowerment need to look beyond “narratives of originary and initial subjectivities” that place individuals into rigidly defined social groups according to factors that can be ascribed to birth and social inheritance. I wrote that the three metaphors of the critical model rely too heavily on these narratives to construct the disempowering effects of English and I made connections between my discussion of the pedagogical and political fallacy and the process of labeling which occurs in TESOL whenever conversations resort to essentialized notions of culture and identity to theorize about students. In order to theorize without slipping into the deterministic and totalizing epistemology of the critical model, I drew on Thesen to suggest a theoretical framework built on “open categories” that are arrived at by holding in tension structure and agency as the two main forces that determine who we are. I then looked at Peirce’s “comprehensive theory of social identity” as an effective model built on “open categories” that can move the critical discourse beyond the limitations of the critical model. I concluded by arguing that Peirce’s theory points to the importance of looking at the notion of language ownership.

## 1. Moving Beyond the Concept of “Mother Tongue”

The critical model resorts primarily to the mother tongue / additional language dichotomy to construe language ownership: a person is seen as really owning a language if and only if it is the language into which he or she is born. My literature review gave some examples of statements that suggest, implicitly or explicitly, that unless people are native speakers of English, they cannot see English as their “own” (see Phillipson and Ngugi in Chapter II,2,iii and Chapter II, 3, iii ).

We have already seen that inheritance factors come into play in determining the extent to which a person can claim ownership of a language (II, 3, ii), but it is crucial for TESOL theorists and practitioners to look at other factors as well. Epistemologically, the notion of mother tongue presents several limitations as a tool for understanding whether or not a person can see a language as his or her “own” language. Rampton (1990) has pointed out some of them by listing a series of myths about the notion of native speaker that still have a lot of currency in TESOL:

1. A particular language is inherited, either through genetic endowment or through birth into the group stereotypically associated with it
2. Inheriting a language means being able to speak it well
3. People either are or are not native / mother tongue speakers
4. Being a native speaker involves a comprehensive grasp of the language
5. Just as people are citizens of one country, people are native speakers of one mother tongue. (p. 97)

He then exposes the epistemological weaknesses of these myths by taking a stance that is in line with the theoretical framework I outlined in Chapter III. The essence of

Rampton's critique is that the notion of mother tongue construes the relationship between language and identity in a fixed, monolithic and unitary way; in reality, the extent to which an individual sees a language as his or her "own" varies with time and as a person moves across social, geographical, and semantic domains.

It is sociolinguistically inaccurate to think of people as belonging to only one social group, once for all. People participate in many groups (the family, the peer group, and groups defined by class, region, age, ethnicity, gender, etc.): membership changes over time and so does language. Being born into a group does not mean that you automatically speak its language well -- many native speakers of English can't write or tell stories, while many non-native speakers can. Nobody's functional command is total: users of a language are more proficient in some areas than in others. And most countries are multilingual. (p. 98)

Again, I would argue that epistemological weaknesses have negative pedagogical and political repercussions. As we have seen, a learner's investment in the process of mastering an additional language is related to his/her expected return in terms of symbolic and material resources. Seeing language ownership as determined exclusively or primarily by birth right limits the material and symbolic return on investment: no matter how well a person might come to master an additional language, he or she will still be placed in an inferior position with respect to a native speaker in the social relations that shape the linguistic exchange.

Eva's example in Peirce's study is a point in case (1995, p. 23-25). Eva's reflections clearly indicate that it was her perceived lack of ownership that put her in a disempowering position with respect to her anglophone clients and co-workers. Her perception of her self as an "illegitimate speaker" of English came largely from her



accent, which labeled her English as non-native, and hence, as inferior. The inferior status of her English translated into a lower share of symbolic and material resources, as it left her feeling “stupid” and with the “worst type of work in the store.” As we have seen, eventually she was able to challenge her “subject position” as an “illegitimate speaker” by constructing an identity of a “multicultural citizen.” I would argue that Eva’s empowering subject position shift was accompanied by her successful claim to a higher level of ownership of English. Eva capitalized on her symbolic resources by infusing the linguistic exchanges at her work place with “her *own* history and experiences” (my emphasis); English ceased to be merely the language through which she passively received the instructions related to her menial tasks, but it became a medium through which she expressed her subjectivity, as she affirmed her “right to speak.” By using English to her advantage, Eva began to show signs of ownership.

It is not without significance that Eva chose to construct the identity of a “multicultural citizen” as a way out of the disempowering subject position of an immigrant. As we have seen, Kachru has argued that English should be seen as a language of international communication “with multiple identities and traditions” (Chapter II, 3, i), rather than merely as the language of those of who are of English extraction. Clearly, Eva resorted to this idea in order to make her English more “legitimate”; her accent presumably did not disappear as she went through her social identity shift. What did change, was the symbolic value attached to her accent. As an “immigrant,” her accent precluded her claims to English ownership; as a “multicultural citizen,” it did not, or at least, not to the same extent.

## 2. From Birth Right to Expertise and Loyalty

As a way to get around the limitations of the concept of mother tongue, Rampton suggests looking at “expertise” and “loyalty.” These two concepts are crucial for understanding what determines language ownership. “Expertise” is indicative of the level of command a speaker is able to exercise on a language (the extent to which a person “owns” a language); loyalty expresses the level of affiliation between a language and a speaker (the extent to which a speaker sees a language as his or her own).

Rampton rightly points out that expertise has a series of advantages over “nativeness” as an indicator of language command:

1. Although they often do, experts do not have to feel close to what they know about: expertise is different from identification
2. Expertise is learned, not fixed or innate
3. Expertise is relative; one person’s expert is another person’s fool
4. Expertise is partial: people can be experts in several fields, but they are never omniscient
5. To achieve expertise, one goes through processes of certification in which one is judged by other people. Their standards of assessment can be reviewed and disputed. There is also a healthy tradition of challenging experts. (p. 99)

Using Peirce’s conceptual vocabulary, we could say that unlike the “nativeness” criterion, “expertise” captures the fluid, de-centered, contested nature of language proficiency: expertise is “not fixed,” but it varies as a student moves along the learning process and across different communicative domains; expertise is not monolithic, but

partial: it cannot encompass everything; expertise is a "site of struggle": it is "reviewed and disputed."

The notion of "loyalty" complements the notion of expertise by expressing the affective aspect of language ownership. According to Rampton, "loyalty" is determined by the interplay of both inheritance and affiliation factors. Inheritance refers to whether or not a speaker is born into the social group traditionally associated with the language in question; affiliation refers to a speaker's desire to be associated with a language. Again, unlike the notion of mother tongue, these terms do not construe loyalty to a language in "fixed," monolithic, uncontested terms.

Both affiliation and inheritance are negotiated. This is fairly self-evident with affiliation, which we commonly think of in terms of the social processes that it involves (requesting, applying, granting, agreeing, breaking off, etc.) But it is also true in the case of inheritance. Governments make laws about it; people try to decide what cultural capital and material items to include in their legacies, while others accept, claim, reject, and contest them. The crucial difference between them is that affiliation refers to a connection between people and groups that are considered separate or different, whereas inheritance is concerned with the continuity between people and groups who are felt to be closely linked. Inheritance occurs within social boundaries, while affiliation takes place across them.

Because both inheritance and affiliation are matters of social negotiation and conflict, the relationship between them is always flexible, subtle, and responsive to wider contexts. It would be very hard to assert that X is a language of inheritance and Y is a language of affiliation . . . . People belong to many groups; feelings of group belonging change, and so do the definitions of groups themselves. New but valued inheritances can emerge from powerful affiliations while cherished inheritances can lose value and be disowned. Wherever language inheritance is involved, there tends to be a sense of the permanent, ancient, and historic. It is important, however, to underline the fact that affiliation can involve a stronger sense of attachment, just as the bond between love partners can be more powerful than the link between parents and children. (p. 99)

“Loyalty” and “affiliation” are also “open” conceptual categories that are in line with Thesen’s epistemological recommendations. As we have seen (Chapter III, ii), Thesen suggests keeping “voice and discourse” constantly in tension with each other in order to come to an understanding of how students see themselves as they move across social settings. Discourse expresses those social forces that define, shape, contain; voice expresses the individual’s agency as he or she navigates across various discourses. Rampton’s ‘inheritance’ has to do with those aspects of group identities that have a tendency to define, shape, and to some extent contain an individual. Affiliation has to do with individuality, resistance, choice (hence, agency); it expresses voice.

The notion of loyalty that arises from this tension is less likely to “label” students problematically than the notion of “mother tongue,” which assumes that a person’s allegiance lies with his or mother tongue throughout his or her life and across any given social field. Kapp’s (2000) interviews with black South African students in a township school confirm that:

What students articulate about language use in interviews, the classroom, and in their writing, and how they actually use the language in the range of contexts in which they are located is often contradictory. These contradictions yield rich insights into the multiple identities that students negotiate across time and space (p. 234).

Looking at the narratives students articulate in terms of Rampton’s notion of loyalty, rather than in terms of mother tongue, might help bringing “the locus of interpretation closer to students,” as Thesen recommends (1997, p. 507). The students Kapp interviewed were skeptical about using isiXhosa, their mother tongue, as a medium

of instruction. Yet, the author found that to characterize students' desire to be proficient in the language of power as assimilationist is "overly simplistic." Their high level of affiliation with English as an instrument for upward social mobility was in tension -- but not incompatible -- with a high level of affiliation with their mother tongue as a marker of group identity. Interestingly enough, for the students who had achieved a high level of expertise in English, this tension was particularly high. Unlike most learners in the township school where Kapp carried out her research, these students used English to communicate with each other outside the classroom. Yet, Kapp's data shows that they were anxious to reject an assimilationist construction of their language practices: they did not want their appropriation of English to be seen as "an attempt to emulate white people" (pp. 243-244). The conclusions Kapp draws from her empirical study problematize the notion that black South African's desire for English can be easily dismissed as "false consciousness" or a symptom of the colonization of their minds. Like Thesen, Kapp found that the "choices students make about how to position themselves with respect to the multiple discourses in their environment are often contradictory, but nevertheless conscious and strategic" (p. 253). Black South African students seem to own English, rather than to be "owned by it." They own English not only because they have mastered, to varying degrees, the lexical, syntactical, morphological and semantic features of this language; they own English *discursively*, by drawing selectively on the "ways of speaking" that open up to them as they make sense of their world and their place in it while using this language.

### 3. Taking and Exercising Ownership: Micro and Macro Issues

Higgins (2003) provides useful insights into important factors that might hamper or facilitate the taking and exercising of English ownership by students who do not belong to those social groups that are generally considered native speakers. She examines the concept of ownership in terms of two characteristics: “indigenization” and “legitimacy.”

“Indigenization,” which is rooted in Widdowson’s (1994) and Kachru’s (1986) work is important in order to explore ownership at the macro level: that is, to see the extent to which communities of speakers see themselves and are seen by others as legitimate speakers of English. “Indigenization” refers to the ways in which speakers take possession of the English language by bending it to their own needs through “lexical borrowings, morpho-syntactic transfer, and semantic expansion” (p. 620). Indigenization, then, can be seen as indicative of ownership:

You are proficient in a language to the extent that you possess it, make it your own, bend it to your own will, assert yourself through it, rather than simply submit to the dictates of its form. (Widdowson, 1994, p. 348)

“Legitimacy,” which is rooted in Peirce’s use of Bourdieu, is a useful concept for looking at ownership from a micro perspective: that is, in order to see the extent to which individuals of various backgrounds are able to claim ownership of English.

Legitimacy and indigenization issues often overlap: “the question of determining who speaks legitimate English hinges upon whether speakers view themselves as legitimate speakers of English with respect to exonormative or endonormative standards.” (p. 622) In other words, whether or not indigenized varieties of English that have emerged in the Periphery (South Asia, anglophone Africa, the Caribbean, etc.) are considered “legitimate” standards of English, as opposed to defective languages that fail to conform to metropolitan norms, affects the extent to which a speaker in the Periphery will be able to take and exercise English ownership.

This point is crucial for understanding the relationship between language, power and identity. For instance, in South Africa, many see the valorization of the variety of English spoken by most black South Africans as a way to reduce the linguistic effect of this language.

Nwala (1993:4) claims, for instance, that BSAfE [Black South African English] represents a specific African identity and embodies the spirit of a democratic South Africa. Educated BSAfE, he claims, the de facto variety presently taught at schools, is not an inferior form of English, but an alternative standard. Similarly, it is noted by Ndebele (1987:17) that SAfE is not the property of its native speakers and must be open to the possibility of grammatical and lexical influence from African languages, while Alexander (1990: 134) predicts that in a democratic South Africa the spoken norm will be different from the present standard which, he argues, discriminates against the majority of the population. (In Gough, 1996, p. 59)

Indeed, valorizing the variety of English spoken by social groups that traditionally have not been considered legitimate speakers of this language can be a way of putting English ownership -- and the symbolic and material resources that come with it -- within

closer reach of those speakers. Expertise might be easier to achieve in a widely heard indigenized variety that carries echoes of the mother tongue, than in a metropolitan standard that many learners might never be exposed to in their day to day life. And from the point of view of loyalty, it is probably easier to see a language as one's "own," if it is more closely connected to a speaker's social environment.

At the same time, however, it is also important not to see indigenization as the only parameter for assessing ownership. The term carries colonial connotations, and it is not easily applicable to contexts that fall outside the Metropole / Periphery dichotomy. The issue of language ownership is crucial also for monolingual English speakers who have been rooted in the Metropole for centuries, such as Ebonics speakers in the United States, or speakers of low prestige Northern regional dialects in Great Britain, who are often made to feel like illegitimate speakers, unless they succeed at mastering the standard dialect of power.

Also, if applied too rigidly, the notion of "indigenization" might imply that the taking and exercising of English ownership *must* entail "lexical borrowings, morpho-syntactic transfer, and semantic extension" from indigenous languages. While we should stop considering these borrowings, transfers and extensions as symptoms of "first language interference," as long as systemic within a linguistic community that uses English for communicative purposes, we should allow for the possibility that English ownership might come from the mastery of the metropolitan standard, lest we slip into the traps of labeling and defining the Other by proscribing that if a speaker belongs to a certain social group, he or she ought to speak English in a certain way.



Writing from Cameroon, Simo Bobda (2004) sees the idea that Africans ought to speak an Africanized variety of English as a form of “linguistic apartheid” that presents continuities with colonial policies that sought to restrict access to the language of power:

Colonial policy was marked by a linguistic apartheid which consisted in driving Africans away from the language, first, by limiting access to formal education, then, by not showing much enthusiasm for teaching them the language, then, at times preferring to encourage Pidgin English, and finally, by encouraging deviant features. Linguistic apartheid continues today through such institutions as the BBC, whose African network Service openly promotes deviant African features through their jingles, the employment of African correspondents with deeply local English features, and reading of unedited letters from listeners that contained substandard features. (p. 19)

Constructing a whole range of varieties of English as “deviant” and “substandard” simply because they diverge from the metropolitan standard is of course extremely problematic from a socio-linguistic point of view. However, Simo Bobda’s stance can serve as a warning against the danger of degenerating into Orientalism, if indigenization is seen as the only way for speakers from the Periphery to take and exercise English ownership.

Finally, Higgin’s notion of “indigenization” foregrounds lexical, morpho-syntactic, and semantic aspects of language. While these structural features of language certainly come into play in the allocation of symbolic and material resources (Eva’s example in Peirce’s study is a point in case), it is crucial to also look at ownership in terms of discourse in order to move beyond the limitations of the critical model in theorizing about language, power and identity. As we have seen (Chapter IV, ii), empirical research suggests that students exercise agency in positioning themselves with

respect to the various discourses that open up to them through their additional language. Discursive agency ought to be highlighted as an indicator of ownership. However, as I have argued, agency must not be measured exclusively in terms of levels of opposition to dominant discourses, as implied by Pennycook's notion of "teaching back" (Chapter II, 2, ii), lest we place students in fixed, identity categories and limit their right to speak with the notion that, as members of certain social groups, certain "ways of thinking" are good for them, while other ways are not.

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## Chapter VI

### Conclusion

My theoretical exploration of the power of English began with a rejection of positions that construe the growth of this language as an intranational and international lingua franca either as an empowering or a disempowering phenomenon (Chapter I). As the idea that the spread of English is “natural, neutral and beneficial” (Pennycook, 1994a, p. 23) has been challenged very eloquently by some of the critics whose work I have reviewed, I have used my mini-dissertation to point out some epistemological, pedagogical, and political weaknesses of critical arguments that do not take sufficiently into account the empowering potential of English (Chapter II). My goal in exposing these weaknesses was not to suggest that it is not important to look at the power of English critically, but rather to suggest ways in which theorists can create a critical discourse that is more effective in advocating the implementation of language policies and of pedagogical practices that reduce the disempowering effects and increase empowering effects of the growing use of English as a medium of communication.

In order to move beyond these limitations, I have adopted a poststructuralist understanding of concepts that are crucial for theories of language and empowerment (Chapter III). Seeing culture and identity as fluid, de-centered, and contested notions has made it possible to arrive at “open” conceptual categories that allow critics to theorize without labeling by considering both structure and agency as forces that shape who we are and where we go in life. I have looked at Pierce’s “comprehensive theory of social

identity” as a model for unraveling some of the intricacies of the relationship between power, language, and identity. Pierce’s theory pointed my study to the concept of language ownership. I have explored this concept (Chapter IV) by reviewing Rampton’s and Higgins’ contributions and by making connections with Kachru’s view of English as an international language that carries “multiple identities and traditions” (1986, p. 116) and that does not belong exclusively to native speakers of Anglo-Saxon extraction (Chapter II,3,i). I will conclude with a brief discussion of the importance of the concept of ownership for the language and empowerment debate in South Africa.

The notion that English ownership can only be claimed by birth right has a lot of currency in South Africa. In an article published in the weekly paper *The Sunday Times*, South African poet and novelist Mike Nicol makes an argument for the need to promote African languages by claiming that a “pro-English tendency is consigning us to a ghetto of mediocrity” (February 29, 2004) and that “the cognitive ability of our young people has been impaired by this tendency towards adopting English as a ‘first language.’” According to Nicol, in the mouth of non-native speakers, English becomes “stripped of ambiguity, cultural and literary references, figures of speech, idiom, rhythm and tone” and he suggests that we refer to the variety of English spoken by the majority of people in South Africa as “English with a lower case ‘e.’”

In a letter to the editor, Titlestad, the former president of the English Academy of South Africa, wrote the following comments in response to a national public radio station’s decision to employ newscasters and talk show hosts who speak English with a black South African accent:

The announcers could not relate punctuation to meaning. They gabbled and wavered, did not appear to understand what they were reading, stumbled over difficult words, misplaced stress, had no sense of intonation patterns, and no style in their delivery. (*The Argus*, May 11, 1995)

Titlestad concedes that “one must be careful of ridiculing accents,” and acknowledges that “English is the major shared language of the country, one which the whole population aspires to learn.” He also claims, however, that non-native speakers’ aspirations are “no justification for the radio station’s poor performance,” and that “mother tongue speakers of English surely have certain rights, the shared language notwithstanding.”

It is true that at some point, a line must be drawn between a more inclusive notion of standard and incompetence, and it is hard to establish where this line must be drawn. Nevertheless, Titlestad’s affirmation of the rights of mother tongue speakers in response to an alleged threat posed by non native speaker’s aspiration to the ownership of English is questionable, from a socio-linguistic point of view.

It would be unfair to draw parallels between Nicol’s and Titlestad’s comments and some of the arguments used language rights activists without reiterating that the activists I have quoted are not against making English a “shared language” but are actually in the forefront in demanding wider access to the language of power while pushing for a greater role for African languages in dominant institutions (Chapter II, 3,iii). But in order to help the general public move beyond the “either” English “or” mother tongue logic that continues to trap much of the debate about language and empowerment in the New South Africa, we must not resort to a rhetoric that, starting from the assumption that a person can only really own his or her mother tongue, suggests

that Black South Africans are bound to be discriminated by an extensive use of English, since this is not their “own” language.

From an epistemological point of view, the notion that only native speakers own English in South Africa is very easy to dispute. Phonetically, non-native varieties spoken in this country might differ significantly from the standard set by most white South Africans who use English as their home language. This discrepancy, however, is not necessarily symptomatic of a linguistic deficit. The English spoken by national icons such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, or of radio talk show hosts such as Vuyo Mbuli and Thebiso Sekwane reverberates with a verbal adroitness that is carried, at least in part, by phonetic features rooted in Bantu languages. Semantically, it is even easier to challenge Nicol’s suggestion that non-native English is so impoverished that it is “incapable of making meaning.” We only need to consider a few of the masterpieces of South African literature that have been produced in English by authors who, according to the birth criterion, could not claim English ownership. The Nguni, Sotho and Afrikaans echoes that resonate in the poetry of Dhlomo and Serote, or the lyric prose of Antjie Krog do not detract but *add* “ambiguity, cultural and literary references, figures of speech, idiom, rhythm and tone” to the English of these authors. Discursively, mastering English does not necessarily entail internalizing Western-centric ways of thinking. Matshoba’s and Themba’s short stories, Modisane’s and Mphahlele’s autobiographies, Nkosi’s novels, and of course, Biko’s and Plaatjies’s political tracts show that black South Africans have owned English by using it to resist subject positions that were imposed on them by the discourses of colonialism and apartheid.

It can be argued that at present, those who have a high level of English ownership as an additional language in South Africa are part of a small elite and that the examples presented above are not representative of the command most black South Africans have of English. This is true, but it is also true that these examples prove that English can be fully appropriated by native speakers of other languages, if certain conditions are met. In order to make English more and more a language of inclusion, rather than a language of exclusion, these conditions need to be investigated by those who are concerned with the power of English. Successful cases of appropriation should not be dismissed as irrelevant, but they should be studied in order to come to a better understanding of what factors facilitate high levels of English ownership. Some of these factors are structural and come with privilege. For example, affluent black South Africans who can afford to attend schools that were formerly “for whites only” are more likely to appropriate English to the point where they can succeed academically and professionally through this language than children who -- at best -- can only hope to attend schools that are plagued by the legacy of Bantu Education. But there have been cases of black South Africans who have managed to reach high levels of English ownership, despite the structural factors working against them. Success stories suggest that learners’ “investment” (Chapter III, 3) in an additional language might play a key role in determining high ownership levels, and that at times, “investment” may even break the structural mechanisms that ensure that the language of power is accessible only to those who are in power. TESOL theorists and practitioners should find ways to stimulate learners’ “investment” through pedagogies that encourage students to see additional languages as their “own,” not to the detriment of their mother tongue, but as an integral part of their

expandable linguistic repertoires. Such pedagogies should promote “discursive ownership” (Chapter II, 3, 1; Chapter IV, 3).

Politically, language rights activists should challenge more vigorously the notion that English ownership is a native speaker’s prerogative. The linguistic potential of this idea is easy to detect in Titlestad’s comments. Using Bourdieu’s terminology, Titlestad’s defense of the “rights” of mother tongue English speakers can be read as an attempt to protect “the profit of distinction” (Chapter II,2,ii) that traditionally has been bestowed upon those who were born into the language of power. This profit is bound to be eroded, if more and more people are allowed to claim English as their “own” language. Going back to Gee’s conceptual vocabulary (Chapter I), Titlestad’s desire to “have English spoken properly” comes across as one of those tests that “dominant groups in a society apply rather constantly” . . . “to exclude non-natives” from the “Discourses in which their power is symbolized” (1996, p. 146).

Nicol’s dismissal of the non-native varieties of English spoken in South Africa as “English with lower case e” might have been a well intended attempt to promote African languages, but unfortunately, it is more likely to have the opposite effect. Statements suggesting that English ownership can only be claimed by birth right reinforce the “master myth” (Chapter I) that sees non-native speakers as illegitimate, or less legitimate speakers of English. In a sociolinguistic community such as South Africa, where so many of the country’s symbolic and material resources are allocated through linguistic exchanges that take place in English, denying English ownership on the basis of birth is the best way to protect the gatekeeping effect of this language.



Ironically, trying to promote African languages with a rhetoric that denies or reduces the possibility of owning English as an additional language might actually marginalize even further the other languages spoken in South Africa. If “nativeness,” rather than a more inclusive notion of ownership, is taken as the criterion for establishing the “legitimacy” (Chapter IV, 3) of speech acts that are carried out in English, we should not be surprised to see what Nicol refers to as a “tendency toward adopting English as a ‘first language.’” Given the value of English in South Africa’s linguistic market, more and more people will try to meet the birth criterion by switching to English as a home language or by resisting the use of African languages in schools and in other prestigious institutions. This resistance will not reduce but foster “the static maintenance syndrome” (Chapter II, 2, ii) that prevents South African languages from increasing their power as tools for claiming symbolic and material resources.

In order to empower the majority of South Africa’s population with wider access to English and a wider use of African languages in dominant institutions, theorists and language right activists must challenge the “master myth” that a person can only own his or her mother tongue. If a more inclusive notion of ownership, rather than the birth right criterion, is taken as a parameter for establishing who can claim English as his or her own language, the gatekeeping effect of the language of power will be reduced. At the same time, native speakers of other languages will be less likely to succumb to a “tendency to adopt English as a ‘first language’” in order to appropriate what many people still consider the “certain rights” of mother tongue speakers.

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